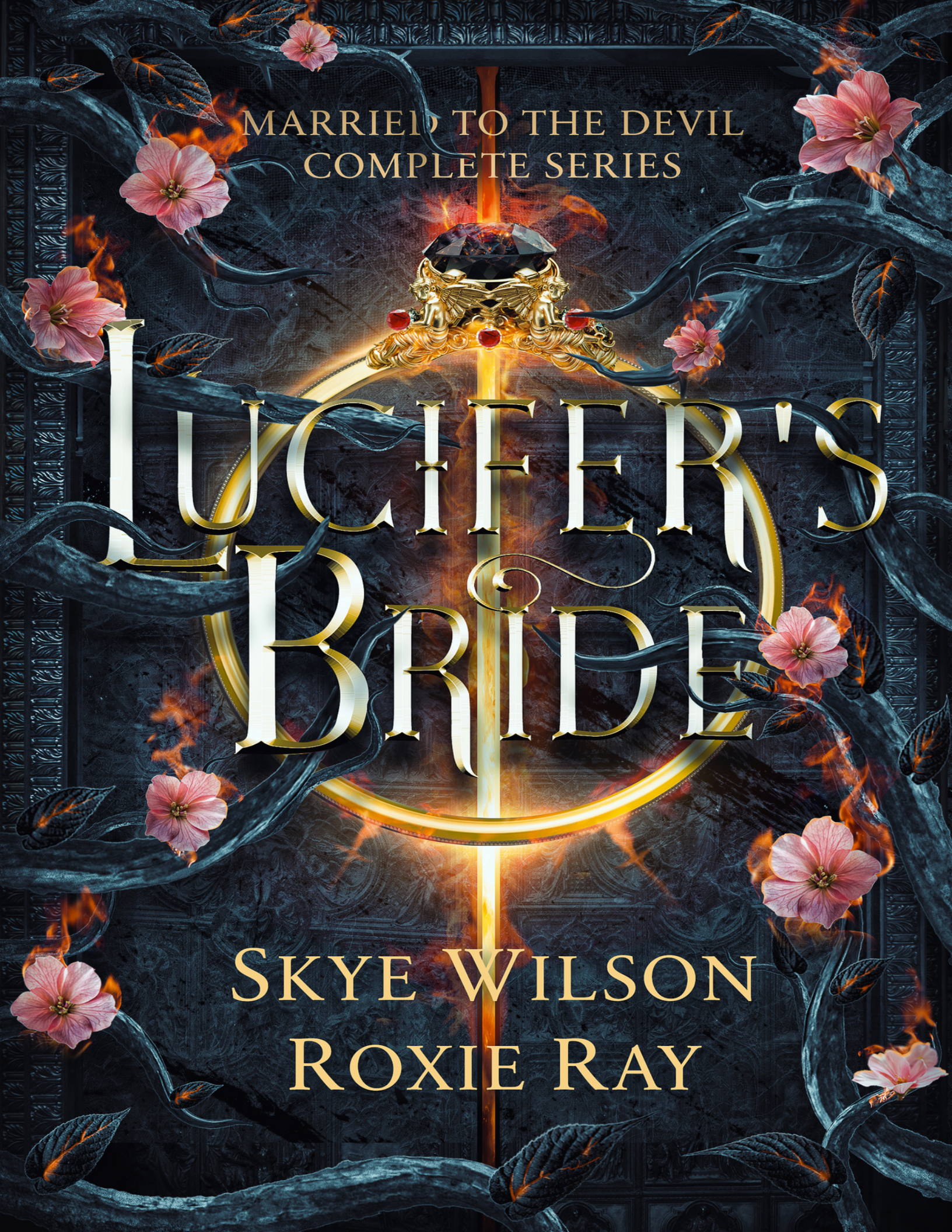




MARRIED TO THE DEVIL
COMPLETE SERIES

LUCIFER'S BRIDE

SKYE WILSON
ROXIE RAY

MARRIED TO THE DEVIL

THE COMPLETE SERIES

ROXIE RAY

SKYE WILSON

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LUCIFER'S BRIDE

FOREWORD

*“Amor, ch'al cor gentil ratto s'apprende,
prese costui de la bella persona
che mi fu tolta; e 'l modo ancor m'offende.
Amor, ch'a nullo amato amar perdona,
mi prese del costui piacer sì forte,
che, come vedi, ancor non m'abbandona...”*

—Dante Alighieri
Canto V, Inferno, “The Divine Comedy”

PROLOGUE

You know the story, love. It's a tale as old as time itself.
Boy meets girl.
Boy loses girl.

Girl meets devilishly charming bastard who tempts with her everything she's ever dreamed of—and the Devil doesn't make promises he can't keep.

You see, darling, that boy never deserved you to begin with.

You, my treasure, you deserved the entire world laid out at your dainty little feet—and so much more.

No ungrateful, simple-minded boy could ever give you that.

But I could.

I will.

My Evie. My eternal love. Only creature on God's green earth, Heaven above it or even Hell below, who could ever stir the flames of desire into my thick cock and my cold, sinner's heart.

I stole you from that pathetic moron you were calling a fiancé again, it's true.

But after the way he fucked you over—frankly, this time, it was like he was asking for it.

You were never really his, love. He might have put his ring on your finger, but he never owned your body. Your heart. Your mind.

Your soul.

No matter where you are, what you look like, the name you wear, or the color of that fire dancing in your eyes, you're mine. *Always* mine.

You've been mine before, more times than you'll ever remember.

You've been torn away from me more times than you'll ever know.

Now that you're finally mine again, here's a new promise for you:

This time, it's forever.

I have an army of the damned at my beck and call, more gold to my name than even kings can fathom, the powers of a fallen angel at my fingertips and the command of the Inferno itself in the palm of my hand.

Never fear, love. I'll protect you. I'll keep you safe.

Whether you want it or not.

And this time, if anyone dares to try and take you away from me again...

This time, there'll be hell to pay.

EVIE

My head pounded like a legion of demons was doing an Irish stepdance on my skull. When I finally pried my eyes open, the sunlight streaming in through the window burned like I was staring straight into the flames of Hades itself.

Nope.

Not today, Satan.

I groaned and pulled the blankets up over my head. I didn't care if every angel in heaven was blowing the trumpets to signal Judgment Day. Whatever I drank last night, I was way too hungover to get out of this bed without a couple of aspirin and some careful consideration of my eternal soul first.

It helped that the pillows beneath me were seductively soft. The sheets and the blanket were even softer. They smelled like a wealthy prince's cologne. Blood orange. Blond leather. White amber. Cinnamon bark. The mattress caressed my every curve like I'd fallen asleep on a dense, fluffy cloud.

And my body...

"What the..." I whimpered as I shifted against the sheets. Suddenly, my back was on fire. My shoulder blades felt like someone had just taken a cat o' nine tails to it, searing claw marks deep into my skin.

The scratches stung even more when I reached back and brushed my fingertips against them. As I ran my hands over the rest of my body to

check for additional damages, I discovered that I was completely naked—not to mention slick between my thighs like I’d just awoken from a wet dream.

Good *God*.

What in the name of Hell did I get myself into last night?

I threw the blankets back and forced my eyelids open again to search for clues. When my eyes adjusted to the light, I found myself in the fanciest bedroom I’d ever slept in.

The room was beautiful. A vase of white roses in full bloom sat on the vanity. A box of what I guessed were expensive chocolates rested next to them, still tied up with a huge crimson bow. The rich black velvet drapes and sheer chiffon curtains on either side of those godforsaken floor-to-ceiling windows looked like they’d been stolen from a royal palace.

The rest of the room had the same tasteful, elegant design as a luxury hotel—the kind I’d always been way too broke to ever dream of, let alone afford.

I wracked my brain for how I’d gotten here and came up completely blank. I only knew one thing for sure.

This was *not* my room.

“Think, Evie.” I clenched my eyes shut again and drummed my fingertips against my temples just to keep myself from panicking.

Waking up in a strange room with no memory of the night before?

This wasn’t like me. At all.

Normally, I played the good girl through and through. Ate my vegetables. Did my homework. In by eleven on weeknights, maybe midnight if I was letting loose a little for the weekend.

I liked reading old books, eating delivery food straight from the container, and comfy nights spent wearing sweatpants and watching period dramas on Netflix.

I liked keeping my head down and my little French-tipped toes in line.

I did *not* get blackout drunk and wake up with a hangover that would make God Himself weep.

I certainly didn’t wind up in unfamiliar beds with no memory of how I got there.

I gritted my teeth as a thought occurred to me.

Did I even drink last night?

The answer to that question hit me like a nice, thick copy of *Les Misérables* straight to the forehead.

Oh, *fuck*.

One drink, I told Ava, Bea and Joan last night. Not two. Not lucky number seven. No bottle service, no going all *Coyote Ugly* on top of the bar—one drink.

One.

I hadn't even wanted a bachelorette party in the first place, no matter how insistently my bridesmaids had begged for one.

But then Adam had made the decision for me.

We were eloping to Vegas, he'd told me. There was no point in missing out on the full experience. If his friends from the accounting firm were taking him out for a night on the town, it was only fair that the girls and I should do the same.

The slow, aching wheels of my mind were turning now. I recalled being dragged out to some hot new bar on The Strip. I remembered ordering a single dirty martini, extra olives, while the girls called for a bottle of champagne.

Vaguely, I remembered trying to read a little for my thesis to take my mind off of how nervous I was for the wedding the next morning...then, nothing.

Except—

Oh, *fuck*!

My eyes shot open. This time, they met the sight of the sunshine out the window with a newfound panic.

It was morning.

My wedding was *today*.

Suddenly, I couldn't get out of bed fast enough. My fingers scrambled as I snatched layer after layer of pillows off the bed, desperately searching for my phone.

I needed to call the girls—probably Ava, since she was the most likely to know what was going on—then, I needed to call Adam.

Probably to make an apology. Or ten.

Judging by how bright it was outside, I was almost certainly already late for our big day.

No matter how deep I got into the pillows, my phone was nowhere to be found. I gave up on them and grabbed hold of the blanket instead. I

wretched the whole thing from the bed with a ferocious snarl... then, I let the blanket slip from my fingers right onto the soft rug beneath my feet.

“Oh my *God*,” I whispered.

My breath entered my lungs with a shudder. I raised a hand to my mouth as my jaw dropped. A Goliath-sized fist wrapped around my ribs and squeezed until they ached. My heart pounded frantically. My knees buckled.

As for the approximately three brain cells I had left, they all leapt up and started hauling ass to “Flight of the Bumblebee” around the inside of my skull until they all bumped into each other, knocking themselves out cold.

Suffice to say, my phone wasn’t there in that bed.

But something else was.

No...

Someone.

I hadn’t been in bed alone.

He was gorgeous. It was impossible to ignore. The man in my bed was actually so handsome that, for a second, it almost hurt to look at him straight on.

He had dark, shining black hair that waved and curled like ink dropped in water. His skin glowed like it was bathed in eternal moonlight. He had the jawline of a 1980s action hero, complete with ruggedly dark, alluring stubble. And the way his body was shaped...as he shifted in his sleep, the marble of an ancient Greek sculpture might as well have turned to flesh there, right before my eyes.

Except...well, there was just one significant difference between how the Greeks had shaped their statues and how this particular man was built.

See, the Greeks had been of the opinion that a good, noble man possessed a dainty, flaccid...manhood.

In other words, they preferred tiny cocks.

Big dicks, on the other hand—according to the Greeks, only a barbaric, lustful, depraved savage would be so shameless as to possess a long, thick cock standing stiffly at attention.

By Greek standards, whoever this man was, he was as lustful and depraved as they came.

Entranced, I watched every hard, chiseled muscle on his body ripple beneath almost luminescent skin as he rolled over onto his side to face me.

As I stared, his eyes cracked open, pale and blue and glittering almost sinisterly.

“You can call me God if you like, love. Bit sacrilegious, of course... though I’ve never had a problem with that.”

His accent was British, but not posh. His voice was dark, low and smooth, like liquor being poured straight from the bottle onto bare skin.

Then, he *smiled* at me. His full lips curled into a wolfish smirk, flashing the fang of a sharp incisor and straight, impossibly white teeth.

My knees went even weaker.

It was the kind of smile that would have melted my panties right off me—that was, if I’d been wearing any.

His gaze stalked up and down my body as his grin widened. I was suddenly way too aware of my own nakedness. Instinctively, I blushed and snatched the blanket up off the floor to cover my body.

“Mm. Beautiful.” His tongue, slick and deep pink, slipped across his lips. “But it’s a little early for playing coy, love, don’t you think?”

He shifted to the edge of the bed with an athletic gracefulness and curled his fingers around the blanket’s edge. As he did it, his knuckles grazed my calf. His touch made me shiver involuntarily—but it wasn’t cold.

It *burned*.

“Hard-to-get is a good look for you, but...” His eyes glinted as his gaze met mine. With a single, sharp tug, the blanket slipped from my fingers and back to the floor again. “Naked is a better one.”

For a moment, I was frozen naked before him again. In fear? Confusion? In lust? All three?

I didn’t know.

In the next instant, his hands curled possessively around my hips, pulling me right back into bed.

He took my wrists in his hands as we rolled together—my body struggling. His, conquering. His hips pressed firmly against mine, pinning me to the mattress. His cock, still hard, slipped against my belly as he deftly worked one of his knees between my own, parting my thighs.

“My Evie,” he breathed, lowering his lips to mine. “Mine.”

He moved so slowly; I could have tried to fight him. But his grip on my wrists was too strong. The weight of his body on top of mine was too

heavy to push off. And as I breathed in his scent, dark and spiced and without even the slightest hint of morning breath...

I was frozen all over again.

This time, I knew exactly why.

Every warning signal in my brain was going off, telling me to struggle. To knee him in that big, gorgeous cock of his and run far. Run fast.

Meanwhile, every bone in my body was ignoring my brain entirely.

I wanted him—and he was making it very clear that he intended to have me.

His mouth slipped against mine gently, like butterfly kisses from his lips, and my lips...they *wanted* it. They ached for him. They yearned for more... and got it. When the kiss deepened from a graze to a crush, my eyes closed, and my mouth answered his.

My body wasn't listening to me. I wasn't sure it *could* listen. That kiss lit up my every cell, left my hips bucking greedily up toward him and my cunt flooding with warmth and light and...

And *need*.

"Good girl. That's better. Now..." He pulled away just as slowly and released my wrists so he could smooth my hair and the bridal veil I still wore pinned in it away from my cheeks. "I'm *starving*."

His hands ran down my body as he shifted between my thighs.

I had a good idea of exactly what he intended on eating—but finally, something snapped into place in my head.

"No," I blurted out. I gripped his shoulders hard and pushed him away. "Stop!"

"Mm. Good point, love." His shoulders rose beneath my fingers as he breathed in and composed himself. "Breakfast first, fuck later. You must be famished, too." He rolled off me then and reached for the black rotary phone on the nightstand. "I'll call room service. What do you fancy? They do everything."

My stomach rumbled like the idea of eating breakfast in bed with this strange, gorgeous, horny naked man was the best idea it had ever heard. My cunt ached like it could think of *one* thing that might be better.

But...this man was not my fiancé.

Looking like that, I wasn't even sure how he was real.

"Who...why..." I scrambled for the sheets and clutched them over my breasts again. "Why did you just kiss me? Why are you *naked*?"

“What?” The man paused mid-dial and looked at me like I’d just started reciting the Pledge of Allegiance. Backwards. “All right. I’ll bite.” He smirked again. “I kissed you because you’re mine and I wanted to. As for why I’m naked...”

His gaze prowled over my body through the sheets all over again. The way he looked at me—it wasn’t just like he appreciated how I looked. It was like I was something he *owned*.

“Same reason you are,” he purred. “We can get dressed later. I intend to spend as much of today exactly like this, exactly in this bed...” His hand moved from phone’s dial and slid beneath the sheets...then between my thighs. “Exactly with you.”

His fingers slipped against the lips of my cunt. It was still so soaked I could hardly believe it.

But this time, when my brain called, my body answered. Immediately.

I drew my hand back and smacked him across his stubbled cheek so hard, for a second, I think both of us saw stars.

“Don’t.” I drew my hand back again like a threat. “I don’t want your fucking hands on my cunt. I don’t even know who you are.”

The man rubbed his cheek slowly—then, to my amazement, he smirked again.

“Why, I’m the Devil himself, darling.” His hand moved between my legs again, almost playfully. If anything, the slap had only encouraged him. “And if you want to roleplay a little resistance... you only needed to ask, love. I, for one, fully intend to consummate our unholy union again...”

This time, when my palm connected with his cheek, he blinked and withdrew his hand.

“What is *wrong* with you?” I spat at him, scrambling backward.

“Many have asked that question throughout the ages,” he said slowly as he placed the phone back on the hook. “For once, now I’m wondering the exact same thing about you.”

“Yeah, well, I’m not the one going around trying to...to fingerbang strangers!” I kicked at his hand as he tried to rest it on my ankle over the sheets. “Get off me. I mean it.”

“You don’t remember last night?” He furrowed his brow and tilted his head to the side. If anything, he looked even more gorgeous from that angle.

Fuck.

“No,” I answered breathlessly. “No, I don’t.”

“Strange... I recall it all so perfectly. The champagne, the sacred vows, the sex—”

“Sex?” I yelped in horror.

I was mortified. Although, that *would* explain why I’d woken up so wet...

“Yes, darling.” His blue eyes got that wicked light in them again. “So, so much sex.”

“No. No, no, no.” I nearly fell off the bed as I tried to put as much space between his body and mine as I could. From the very edge of the mattress, I leveled my index finger at him sternly. It was the only weapon I had. “You need to tell me what’s going on here. Don’t make me ask again.”

“Maybe the ring on your finger will jog your memory,” he suggested.

I looked down at the hand I was pointing at him with. When I turned it over, a black diamond glittered up at me. It was huge, set ornately in silver, with two rubies on either side of it like drops of spilled blood.

“What...” I glared down at it.

Not only was this man not my fiancé—that was *not* my engagement ring.

“I can show you the marriage license too, if you like,” he said with a shrug as he rose from the bed. “I thought last night was rather memorable. If anything, I’m hurt that you’ve already forgotten.”

“That...that can’t be true.” My brain cells were scrambling again—to pitiful results. “You’re lying. That’s a lie.”

“They do say I’m the father of those—but this hardly seems like the time.” He glowered as he moved across the room. I blushed as I tried not to stare at the sculpted muscles of his ass while he did it. “If this is some kind of game, Evie—”

“It’s not.” I backed up against the wall and shook my head. “You need to tell me where I am and who you are. Now. Before I call the cops.”

“The police? Funny.” He chuckled to himself as he picked a pair of black slacks up off the floor. “This isn’t how I imagined our honeymoon starting, but...well, ask and ye shall receive.”

He sighed as he stepped into his slacks.

“Where are you?” he repeated my question back to me as he zipped up his pants. He gestured to the room around us. “This is our honeymoon

suite—and my building, for that matter. You’re in the Inferno—finest entertainment establishment on the Vegas Strip. Or, below it, I suppose.”

Suddenly, I wanted to hit him all over again. He would’ve deserved it, too. “Stop talking in riddles.”

“You first.” He sighed again as he tightened his belt and buckled it. I squeezed my thighs together as my pussy throbbed. Somehow, even watching this man put his clothes back *on* was doing it for me. “Why am I naked? That much seems a bit obvious. Who am I?” He moved to a bar cart in the corner. It was laden with glimmering crystal decanters all filled to the brim with liquors, dark and light. “Lucifer, Satan, Star of the Morning... They call me Deal-maker, World-breaker, King of Hell... I could go on. For our intents and purposes...I’m Luke Dawnstar. That’s the name on our wedding certificate, anyway—because most important, Evie, I *am* your husband. Legally and spiritually. Whether you remember it or not.”

“You *can’t* be my husband.”

“No?” He glanced at me as he selected a decanter full of clear liquid and lifted it up to the light. “We said our vows last night before God Himself. A little uncomfortable for me—but I suppose the Almighty would have been keeping an eye on things regardless.”

“What are you talking about?”

“We’re married, Evie. Like it or not, you’re mine.”

He turned his back to me as he reached for a glass. As I eyed the muscles of his back, I saw that he had nail marks down his shoulder blades too. Just like the ones I’d found on mine. Beneath the scratch marks, there were two twisted scars on either side of his spine.

Whatever had caused them...

It looked like it had hurt.

“Can I tempt you, Evie?” When he turned again, he was offering me a glass.

“I...um.” I licked my lips. My mouth had suddenly gone dry. “No. I have a headache.”

And obviously, I’d overindulged last night.

Massively.

Disastrously.

It wasn’t like me, but neither was any of the rest of this.

It was the only explanation.

If what this man was saying was true...

I'd gotten drunk. I'd gotten married.

And I'd fucked up my entire life in the process.

"Maybe later, then." He shrugged and reached for a different decanter. "If your head hurts, you need water anyway. Here."

He poured me a glass and crossed the room to offer it to me.

There was no ice floating in it, but when I wrapped my fingers around the crystal, it was shockingly cold.

"I thought last night was really one to remember, you know." His gaze was scrutinizing now. Like he was trying to stare through my eyes straight into my soul. "On every level. Shame you don't agree."

"I want my phone," I snapped back at him. "And my clothes."

"Yes. You're a woman of many demands." His lips twitched like he wanted to smirk again. I was grateful when he didn't.

"And I want to leave." I pulled myself up to my full height—not that it was much. I was around five-seven. This man was easily six-four. "I don't want you to try and stop me, either."

"We'll see about that." He wrapped his fingers around the glass on top of mine and pressed it to my lips. "First, drink."

I kept my eyes on his as the liquid hit my lips. I gave it a tentative taste first. There was no burn of vodka, no bitter taste like he'd drugged it. Just...water.

Probably the best water I'd ever tasted, actually. It was cold and crisp, like he'd taken it straight from the melt of an iceberg.

A sip quickly turned to greedy gulps. He took the glass from me when it was empty and refilled it, then pressed it back into my hands.

This time, I didn't need any prompting. I was thirstier than I'd ever been.

"Good girl. Now, as for your demands... Your phone, I distinctly recall watching you chuck it into the fountain at the Bellagio around midnight," he said as he watched me finish off the second glass. "Your clothes..."

He moved across the room again and picked up the white body-con minidress I remembered putting on before going out last night. There was a pink sash still pinned to it that said BRIDE, but the sash and the dress were both torn down the front between the I and the D.

"Ruined, unfortunately. My fault," he admitted.

"Your fault?" I lowered the glass as I stared at my ruined dress.

“Just couldn’t wait to see it on the floor.” He shrugged and tossed it aside. “We’ll get you new clothes—and a new phone as well. But as for leaving...”

I swallowed and pressed my back against the wall again as he approached me. His steps were slow and measured, but I knew when they stopped, his body was going to be as close to mine as he could get.

“If you remembered anything about last night, Evie, you would know why that isn’t an option.” He loomed over me and plucked at the sheer white wedding veil that still fell over my hair. The warmth of his breath washed against my cheek as he lowered his lips to my ear. “But if you’d like to get back into bed and behave yourself for me, I’m sure I could find some way of making you recall exactly why you don’t want to leave.”

My heart was pounding again. As he rested his forehead against mine and his hands encircled my waist over the sheet, my legs were jelly. Useless.

But I wasn’t falling for this. I wasn’t going to let myself.

Not again.

No matter how much my body might have hated me for telling him no.

“Get out,” I growled through my teeth at him. I’d never thought of myself as an intimidating woman, but in this instance, I was pretty sure I needed to become one.

And fast, too.

To my relief, he took a step back. That insatiable smirk had finally left his lips, but the hunger in his eyes still lingered.

“I vowed to obey you last night, Evie.” His voice rumbled as he spoke, and my heart skipped a beat like it was trying to match the rhythm of his words. “If that’s what you think you want...”

But then that wickedness glinted in his blues again and he descended on me like a man starved. His mouth claimed mine, hard and fast. A quick, ruthless victory.

He ran his thumb across my cheekbone, and my entire body flared to life. His lips burned like wildfire. It made me gasp, and he took advantage of my parted lips, pressing his tongue into my mouth and flicking it against my own tongue.

For all his talk of being the Devil incarnate, this time I was almost inclined to believe him.

God. He even tasted like sin.

“How’s your memory now?” he whispered against my lips.

I blinked.

I drew in a breath.

Then, I slapped him again.

“Mm. Fair enough.” When he backed away, he looked resigned about it. “I’ll go, then. While I’m gone, though—you should really order up something to eat. Indulgence is just upstairs. They do a *croque madame* well worth going to Hell for.”

“I’m not eating breakfast.” I clutched the sheet a little tighter around me. “I’m leaving.”

“No, you’re not.” He stooped to pick his shirt up off the floor and shrugged it over his shoulders. “You may not remember it, but you made a deal with the Devil last night. I vowed to obey you. You vowed to obey me, too—and I say you’re staying.”

“You can’t keep me here,” I insisted.

“Can’t I?” He paused at the door and glanced over his shoulder at me. “The Inferno is my domain, love—and you *are* my wife.” There was no playful wickedness in his eyes now—just fire, burning dark in the pale blue of his irises. “I can do as I like.”

LUKE

If I didn't already know I was damned, I would have been sure of it as I left our suite with the mark of Evie's palm still burning on my cheek.

Three whole smacks before she ordered me out.

Two kisses, too.

I pressed my hand to my cheek fondly as my shirt flapped around my waist.

At least it was a new record.

"Good afternoon, Your Majesty." Phlegyas bowed low at the waist to me as I entered the elevator, flashing me the top of his salt-and-pepper hair. "Might I congratulate you again on your new bride?"

"Save it and take me up to Avarice." My jaw was tense as I moved to the back of the elevator, but I kept my shoulders loose.

An eternity of ruling Hell had taught me a thing or two about managing my temper.

Words to live by: never let your men see you truly burn until you mean it.

"Trouble in paradise, sir?"

"And down here as well." My chest rumbled with annoyance. "She's already thrown me out."

"My condolences. Marriage is never easy, sir." Phlegyas pulled his gloves on a little tighter then pushed the button for the fourth floor. The

doors slid closed and the elevator shifted upward. “As you well know. I’m sure you’ll smooth things over soon.”

“I’d better.” Outwardly, my shoulders were set, and my expression was vacant. Inwardly, I was smoldering. “Pray for me, Phlegyas?”

Phlegyas chuckled and made a big show of crossing himself. “Every day of my death, sir.”

THERE WERE no clocks in Avarice. All the better to keep our guests at the tables there until either they were spent, or all their money was.

My pocket watch said it was only one in the afternoon, but Avarice was the finest casino on The Strip—and this was still, technically, Vegas. The floor was full of demons and sinners alike. It was cacophony of sensation, emotion, light, sound. Triumph. Loss. Victory and defeat.

Singing over it all like a soloist in a Baptist choir, no matter whether the chips were up or down, was that one thing I needed more than anything right now.

It wasn’t greed that drew gamblers into casinos, it was hope.

At a black felt-top poker table, I found an empty stool. As soon as my ass kissed the leather, I found a drink in my hand as well.

“Still celebrating?” A suave demon with sleek black hair and a smooth smile folded as I sat down. Abaddon—the Destroyer. Master of the Abyss.

“No such luck.” I took a sip of my drink and let the tonic fizz on my tongue until the gin burned down my throat. “Licking my wounds.”

Abaddon snorted. “Already? The way you were wrapped around each other last night, I didn’t think you two would be out of bed until next week.”

“You thought wrong.”

“What’d you do?”

“Nothing.” I rested my elbows on the edge of the table and shook my head. “It’s someone else who’s meddled this time.”

“What do you mean?”

“She’s forgotten. No memory of any of it. Nothing at all.”

“Damn.” Abaddon raised his eyebrows and leaned into the back of his stool, then waved one of the cocktail waitresses over for an Old Fashioned. “In that case, can’t let you drink alone.”

The game was seven-card stud. I considered joining—until I saw who was dealing.

The Fourth wore Armani and a sleek black motorcycle helmet with a dark, reflective visor. He dealt the cards silently and dealt them well.

The only other poor soul at the table was a balding man with a broad forehead slick with sweat. I could have smelled the desperation on him from miles away. He was down to his last few chips. I didn't need to see his hand to know that soon, he wouldn't even have those anymore.

"So." Abaddon pushed his orange twist into his glass and swirled it around in the whiskey. "Are we suspecting traitors or angels?"

"Must be angels." I almost laughed. "Traitors are happy in Hell."

"If there were angels here in the Inferno, they couldn't have been here for long." Abaddon sipped at his drink. "The Exalted burn here in Hell the same as we would in Heaven."

"They didn't need long. I'm just wondering how they got in."

"It's...unfortunate, yes," Abaddon agreed. "I was so sure you got everything right this time around."

"It could be worse. Remember last time?"

"Woodstock?" Abaddon raised his eyebrows and sighed. "Can't believe it's been so long."

"Two perfect days of peace, love, rock 'n' roll...and her." I smiled at the memory. I'd found her dancing barefoot in the mud to Richie Havens, wearing little more than a pair of bikini bottoms and the flowers in her hair. Lust at first sight. "Before it all went sideways, at least."

"Two perfect days?" Abaddon thumped his glass against the edge of the table and laughed loudly. "The food and water were all laced with LSD, there were no toilets or showers... Even the *humans* wanted to call in their National Guard. And that was *before* the angels showed up. When was that, anyway—Summer of Love?"

"No. Sixty-nine."

"She took her time coming back this go-around, didn't she?"

"And yet, she's always worth the wait." I frowned as the memories of our last time together faded. "It should have been perfect this time."

"And she doesn't remember *anything*?"

"Nothing." I shook my head. "Not even my name."

"How perfectly...strange." Three identical female voices, low and crisp, spoke in unison from behind Abaddon and me.

We turned to find three identical black women in showgirl costumes standing behind us. Their dark hair was coiled into thousands of sleek,

tight ringlet curls beneath their feathered headdresses. Their deep brown skin was oiled to shimmer as brightly as the bejeweled burlesque corsets they wore.

One of the women rested her hand fondly on my arm. Another helped herself to Abaddon's drink. The third draped a slender, muscular arm around the shoulders of the gambling human at the table.

"You know who you're gambling against, don't you?" she asked the human.

The man only sweated even harder and nervously nodded his head. "Down too much to lose now," he grunted.

"Poor, doomed thing." She clicked her tongue at him and patted the thinning wisps of hair on top of his head. "Good luck. Your life depends on it."

"Enjoying yourself, Legion?" I asked the woman to my right.

"Very much," all three said in unison. The one to my right smirked down at me. "We're just surprised you aren't enjoying yourself more, Luci."

"Don't call me that," I grumbled.

"We thought you'd be on your honeymoon by now," said the Legion nursing Don's drink. "What a shame."

"Losses all around today," cooed the Legion observing the game over the human's shoulder as he lost another grand. "A shame indeed."

The human tore his necktie loose as he shoved his last few chips toward The Fourth for a final round. The only sound The Fourth made as he shuffled was the whisper of the cards as they streamed into place between his hands.

"So, she's already told you to fuck off, huh?" All three Legions moved together. Their forms flickered as they came together and converged into one. "Maybe you could use some lady advice, Luce. We're happy to give it."

"Don't call me that, either," I grunted. Legion enjoyed nicknames—too much, in my opinion. Each was always somehow worse than the last.

"What'd you do to the poor girl?" Legion asked.

"He said he didn't do anything," said Abaddon.

Legion laughed as she perched on the edge of the table. "You tried to fuck her, didn't you?"

“I didn’t realize she’d lost all memory of me,” I said with a shrug. “Thought I was enjoying a lovely morning in bed with my wife. If I had known, I would have handled it better.”

“You kept your cool, though?” Legion asked. “Didn’t lose your temper?”

“Mostly.” I shrugged. “As best I could.”

“And the treaty is still intact?”

I nodded. “She came here willingly last night. I don’t see why it wouldn’t be.”

“Then the cards are still in our favor.” Legion gave the human a sympathetic smile as he sweated out his next decision.

The Fourth had paired his door card on the fourth street, so the human had the option of betting double on the small limit or the larger one.

“I’m not so sure about that,” I said.

I had a feeling that no matter which way the human decided, he was going to make the wrong choice.

“Nonsense. *She* found *you* this time,” said Legion. “Played herself right into your lap, *Lucifer*.”

“That’s better.” I nodded in approval.

“You wooed her,” Abaddon added. “You won her from her useless human mate. You made her your bride and got her here of her own free will—”

“All in one perfect night,” Legion finished. “How many times has that happened before?”

“None. But...” I gripped the edge of the table hard enough to crack the wood. “It doesn’t matter now. Someone’s undone it all.”

“So make her remember,” Legion said—as if it was truly that simple. “Take her Above, retrace your steps...”

“It’s dangerous Above,” I pointed out. “Las Vegas may be Sin City, but there are still angels among every group of sinners.”

“We’ll protect her, then. You know how human she is—whether she’s your wife or not. She’ll want to return to Earth eventually. If you keep her here now, if she ever escapes—”

“She won’t dare come back willingly. Yes, Legion, I know. This is far from the first time any of us have been through this.” I pressed my thumb against the crack I’d made in the table’s wood and traced the line it made. “But if I can’t get her back down here willingly regardless?”

“The treaty is unbroken still,” Legion reminded me. “The Exalted can’t hurt her while she’s Above this time.”

“Not directly, anyway.” As Abaddon spoke, Legion glared daggers at him and he smirked. “What? It’s worth being said.”

“She’s safest if she can come and go as she pleases.” Legion finished Don’s drink and moved onto mine. “So, Your Majesty, awaken her memories, if you can. If you can’t, seduce her a second time. You’ve done it before. You can do it again.” She leaned down to whisper in my ear. “You’ve heard the saying about how if you love someone, you should set them free, haven’t you?”

“I said that,” I told her. “About the humans, right before the Exalted tossed me out of Heaven.”

“Then you know what we’re talking about,” said Legion.

I drummed my fingers against the table for a moment, then nodded.

“It’s the only way,” I agreed. “But we’re not taking any chances. Abaddon...”

“Your wish is my command, my king.”

“Pass through the Abyss. Find the other Fallen. I’d send Moloch or Malacoda, but—”

Abaddon snorted. “They’re still entertaining your bride’s friends at the Bellagio, aren’t they?”

“Can’t be too careful,” I said.

“Lock and Mal always get the best jobs.” Abaddon chuckled and raised a hand to the air at his side. The colors around his fingertips faded into black and white as he opened a portal. It stretched to the height of a doorway tall enough to fit Abaddon’s frame. “I’m on it—but I’m not happy about it. You know how hard some of them can be to find.”

“You don’t have to be happy about it,” I said. “Just do it.”

“And I will.” Abaddon placed a foot into the portal. The gold on his cufflinks turned to grayscale as he passed through. “Consider it done.”

The portal closed behind Abaddon. Legion waved her hand through the place where he’d been just a moment ago, wiggling her fingers in the empty space that he’d left.

“We hate to see him go, but we love to watch him leave.” She hummed in amusement. “Do you have a task for us, Your Majesty?”

“Shopping. She’ll need new clothes if she’s going Above. Get her ready for me. She’s still my wife. She’ll need to look the part,” I said, and

Legion grinned.

“Oh, you do love us, Luci, don’t you?”

“Don’t test your luck,” I said, just as the human lost his final hand of cards.

The man stared at his chips as they disappeared beneath The Fourth’s leather-gloved hands. The scent of desperate hope poured off of him as he looked up at The Fourth. The smell was fresh and green as the perfume of newly fallen rain after a long drought.

“Do you, um...can you offer me a line of credit, maybe?” The man pulled a handkerchief from his jacket and mopped at his brow.

The Fourth merely nodded and leaned forward. He reached for the man’s tuxedo shirt—then, through it.

The man shuddered as The Fourth’s fingers passed through his chest. When The Fourth withdrew his hand again, he held a single, glowing white poker chip, which he deposited into the human’s hand.

I glanced at Legion. She must have known what I was thinking.

“Don’t,” she warned me, but it was already too late.

Before the man could place the chip down on the table, I took it from him and pressed it back into his chest.

“The Chiefs are playing the Broncos on Sunday,” I whispered in the man’s ear. “The Chiefs win. Bet on it—then go home to your wife, sign your winnings over to her, and never come back here again.”

The man had been in something like a trance for all of the conversation about angels and celestial treaties. He’d been too involved in the dangerous game he was playing to even notice what we were talking about. But as I spoke to him, he came up out of it, nodded once, then hurried toward the exit as fast as his short little legs could carry him.

“Luci,” Legion pouted. “You know how much The Fourth hates it when you steal his souls away from him. Being in love always turns you so damned *soft*.”

“I have a different soul for you, my friend. If you would like to take it,” I told The Fourth. “Adam Barrett. Do you know him?”

Slowly and silently, The Fourth nodded.

“He’s done my wife a great wrong. I’d like for you to arrange for him to leave Las Vegas. Immediately. Permanently. Can I count on you?”

Again, The Fourth nodded—then, just as silently, he rose and left.

“You’re killing off her fiancé?” Legion let out a laugh.

“Ex-fiancé.”

“Still.” Legion crossed her arms over her chest and chuckled. “I take back what I said about you going soft. That’s positively *ruthless*.”

“He disrespected her. And *I* can’t harm him.” Not without breaking our precious treaty with Heaven, at least. “Besides. There’s war on the horizon, Legion. One way or another, you know it will reach us somehow.”

“And we can’t have any loose ends wandering around,” Legion agreed. “I understand completely.”

“Especially not the kind who will come back begging for forgiveness when he realizes exactly what an irreplaceable thing he lost.” Poor, empty-headed Adam. I’d almost feel sorry for him for always losing her to me—if he wasn’t always such an arrogant, ungrateful prick about it.

“So, what am I dressing our girl for? Where did you meet? Lust?” Legion guessed hopefully.

“Limbo,” I told her. “First floor. She’ll need something sleek and smart. Designer, obviously. Shoes, make-up, purse—the entire outfit. A day-to-night look, if you can manage it.”

“Ugh,” Legion groaned. “This is going to be a long day, isn’t it?”

“For the rest of you? Maybe.”

Make her remember. Win her back.

Evie was the only thing in the universe I loved more than winning—and she was the ultimate prize as well. I glanced down at the now-empty glass of gin and tonic that Legion had finished for me. Suddenly, I didn’t feel like I needed it anymore.

“And for you?” Legion asked.

I smiled. “For me? Not at all.”

EVIE

The rotary phone on the nightstand crackled and sizzled when I picked it up. It was the sound of a bonfire of the vanities, a thousand banned books going up in flames.

It scared me a little.

It probably should have.

All of this—the strange hotel room, the strange man in my bed, the incredibly weird gap in my memories from last night—was scary.

But if what Luke said was true, my phone was drowning in the sparkling waters of the Bellagio's fountain, and this weird old landline was my only way to call out.

On the phone's dial, each number had a different word under it in thick black typewriter font.

Some were positive words. Eight was labeled *ILLUSION*. Seven was *MIGHT*.

Others were a little more nuanced, though. Number six was labeled *HERESY*, and four was named *AVARICE...Greed*.

I rolled my eyes as my finger hovered over number two. *LUST*.

Luke *had* claimed to be the Devil himself, I supposed. In my humble opinion, he was taking the metaphor a little far.

When he told me that this building was called the Inferno, I thought he was making some kind of joke about my dissertation. I was doing an entire

master's degree on Dante Alighieri and his *Divine Comedy*. Everyone always liked to have a laugh at the expense of us classics majors.

But if this wasn't a hallucination, or worse, a joke...

Apparently, Luke and I had more in common than the rings on our fingers and the bed we'd both fallen asleep in last night.

He'd named every floor of this building after some convoluted concept from Dante's vision of Hell.

It wasn't my degree that felt like the joke anymore.

This whole fucking racket was set up like some kind of cruel running gag—and every punchline was at my expense.

I ignored the labels on the phone's numbers and dialed out. I didn't know how to explain any of this to Adam yet, but I knew if I could get hold of Ava, she'd probably be able to fill in the missing details from last night for me.

My thesis might have been in the useless classics department at UCLA, but Ava was doing hers in science. Her level head would be my saving grace—and I knew she'd be kind as she explained to me exactly how bad I'd fucked up.

Then, I could start working toward getting my life back together.

Starting with finding something to wear and getting the hell out of this place. Immediately.

When I dialed Ava's number, the phone didn't even ring, though.

"We're sorry," a sultry, almost mechanical female voice said through the receiver. "*The number you have dialed cannot be connected on this line. To call out into Greater Hell, please dial six-six—*"

I hung up the phone.

Divine fucking comedy indeed.

Still wrapped in the bedsheets, I wandered over to the vanity in search of my purse. As I caught a glimpse of myself in the vanity's mirror, I almost didn't recognize myself at first.

My blonde hair was wild and full of body beneath my bachelorette party veil from last night. It was bedroom hair, messy but somehow chic. My cheeks were flushed, and my boring gray eyes were especially bright.

I looked *hot*. Considering that I normally rolled out of bed looking like an undercaffeinated library goblin, I couldn't act like it was exactly a bad surprise, but... I looked well-fucked. Like I'd been ravished last night. Ridden hard and put away *soaking* wet.

And that wasn't all. On my cheek, over the place that Luke had stroked with his thumb and set my body alight before he left, there was a little beauty mark that hadn't been there before.

I leaned forward to examine it more closely.

It was in the shape of a starburst, a supernova, paler than the rest of my skin. Like a white tattoo.

"Oh, Jesus," I hissed as I tried to rub it away.

Hopefully, it was temporary.

The only thing that could make my situation more embarrassing right now was if somehow last night, I'd lost my mind so completely that I'd actually gotten a *face tattoo*.

The mark wouldn't budge, though. It was emblazoned on my skin. Permanently. Even when I hopped into the shower and turned the water up as hot as it would go, when I came back out, the tattoo was still there.

Everything I learned about my behavior from last night was getting worse and worse.

Who was I kidding? I was screwed and I knew it.

My bridesmaids were going to be worried about me. They would've stopped me long before I went full Mike Tyson last night—which meant that I'd almost certainly wandered off on my own. They probably had no idea where I was.

To be fair, I didn't really know that either.

My parents, at least, didn't have the faintest clue that I was even in Las Vegas—nor did they need to know. They hadn't ever liked Adam, even before we started living in sin together. But since they didn't know I was here, at least they wouldn't have to know what a complete fuck-up I'd become.

If they ever found out, they'd be disappointed in me. That thought curled my stomach inward and made my heart pang with guilt.

But that didn't hurt nearly as much as it did when I thought about Adam himself.

Two months ago, he'd bought me a beautiful diamond engagement ring that must have cost a small fortune. The Vegas thing had been his idea, but I'd been happy enough to go along with it.

There were plenty of shitty men in this world, but at least Adam was steady and stable and safe.

Even if my friends and parents didn't like him, I could've done a lot worse for myself.

Now, he was going to be expecting me at the wedding venue any minute now, and I had no phone to call him with. No clothes to escape in. The ring he'd given me was missing—and another, darker ring had somehow taken its place. When I tried to take it off, it wouldn't budge.

Even if I did find some way out of the Inferno, I had no way to explain to Adam what had happened last night—because even I didn't know.

I flopped back down on the bed and let myself wallow in my despair. Just for a moment.

If this place really was fashioned after Hell itself, at least despair was keeping in theme with the source material.

This wasn't like me. I was a first-year grad student at UCLA with a full course load and a classroom full of undergrads to deal with.

Sure, I enjoyed a drink or two every once in a while, on the weekends, but to get blackout drunk...I must have downed an entire bottle of something last night. Maybe two or three.

I hadn't been this hungover since I'd started partying with Ava, Joan and Bea during our undergrads.

I hadn't made a mistake this big...*ever*.

"So how the fuck did I get so drunk last night?" I shouted at the ceiling. I grabbed a pillow off the bed and pulled it over my face so I could let out a scream.

"Drinking, most likely."

I pulled the pillow away from my face as I heard the same female voice from the phone earlier there in the room with me.

She was beautiful. Tall and black with the muscles of a ballet dancer. She wore high-waisted palazzo pants, a white blouse, and elegant heels.

There were two other women with her. They all had the same faces and the same clothes on. Identically dressed triplets. But the other two women had their arms full of designer shopping bags. I was no label queen, but even I knew the logos for Chanel and Yves Saint Laurent.

"I'm, um...sorry, but I think you have the wrong room." I drew my feet up beneath the sheet I was still clutching and scooted away from the women.

Being naked in front of strangers wasn't a whole lot of fun—but I supposed it could have been worse.

It could have been men.

It could have been Luke again.

"You're Evelyn St. John, aren't you?" the woman in the center asked.

"I am, yes." She'd even pronounced my last name correctly. Not *Saint John* like the apostle, but the British way, even though her accent was American like mine. *Sin-jin*. "And you are...?"

"We are *Leeg*—" The center woman narrowed her eyes at me, then chuckled. "Leigh. You can call us Leigh."

"Sorry, what?" I raised an eyebrow. If all three of these triplets were named Leigh, they had some truly shitty parents. "Which one of you is—"

"We all are, Evie. Try to keep up." The main Leigh nodded to the other two, who began unpacking the shopping bags. Designer dresses, bags, shoes and even lingerie were suddenly draped across the room all around me.

"You definitely have the wrong room." I stared at the haul wide-eyed and slack-jawed.

All of this stuff must have cost a fortune. There was no way it was all for me.

"No, sweetheart, we don't," the main Leigh said as she nudged my destroyed dress from last night across the floor with the toe of her shoe. "We hear you've had a little...wardrobe malfunction. We've brought you some alternative options."

I narrowed my eyes. "Did Luke send you?"

All three Leighs stopped and smiled.

"Who else?" they answered in unison.

"No. I don't want anything from *him*." I crossed my arms over my chest and shook my head. "You can take it all back to wherever it came from. I appreciate the gesture, but no thank you."

"Dear, sweet Evie," the main Leigh cooed as she took me by the elbow and pulled me off the bed. She was surprisingly strong. It was like I weighed nothing to her at all. "Unless you're planning on leaving this place wrapped up in that sheet, we're not sure you have a choice."

I scowled.

I didn't want to owe Luke for all of these clothes. I didn't want to owe him *anything*.

But at the same time...

I was naked, and she had clothes for me.

She did have a point there.

I tore my elbow out of the main Leigh's grasp and collected myself. Then, with a sigh, I took a better look at the clothes the Leighs had laid out.

Each set of lingerie alone must have cost about the same as what I'd paid in rent each month for my first apartment during undergrad, if not more.

The dresses were Armani, YSL and Alexander McQueen. The shoes were all either Jimmy Choos or Louboutins. An assortment of Chanel bags was piled around the bar cart for me to choose from, and on top of the vanity, the Leighs had left lipsticks and eyeshadow palettes galore.

"I only need one set of clothes to get out of here," I pointed out. "This has got to be like...fifty thousand dollars' worth of merchandise."

"More, actually," the main Leigh said. "We had no idea what your taste or style would be, this time around...so we thought you might like a selection to choose from."

"This time around?" I asked, confused. They were acting like they'd known me before, but these weren't the kind of women you forgot about knowing. This was definitely the first time we'd met.

"This color would be divine on you," one of the Leighs said, ignoring my question as she offered me a crimson velvet YSL minidress.

"We should really start with your bra and panties first, though." Another Leigh held up two lacy black sets of lingerie. "Do you prefer La Perla or Agent Provocateur?"

"I don't know the difference," I grumbled as I grabbed one of the sets at random. "Do you mind turning around?"

"If you're wearing the Agent P, you'll want the full set," the main Leigh said, like I hadn't spoken at all. She pressed a matching garter belt and a pair of sheer black thigh-high stockings into my hands. "Go ahead. Put them on."

I stood frozen and wide-eyed in the midst of the Leighs as they bustled around the room comparing purses and shoes to the different dresses for me.

They showed no signs of leaving.

Okaaaay then.

It was going to be a little awkward, changing in front of them...

But at least they seemed to be paying attention to the clothes and not me.

I let the sheet fall and put on the bra and panties as quickly as I could. They both hugged my curves perfectly, even though I had no idea how these women could have known my bra size—34C.

The lingerie only made me think of the pretty white bra and panties that were probably still hanging up in the suite Adam had gotten the girls and me at the Bellagio. That was what I should have been wearing today, along with my grandmother's pearls and the cute, modest bridal gown I'd found in a vintage boutique in Venice Beach.

I wouldn't be wearing any of that anytime soon now, though. Or ever, for that matter, depending on how furious Adam was with me for screwing everything up.

I caught another glimpse of myself in the mirror and ripped the veil out of my hair.

It seemed stupid to wear it now. I wished I'd never let the girls pin it in my hair last night to begin with.

"What do you think of these, Evie?" While I was lost in my worries, the Leighs were still focused on playing personal stylist. They each held up a different dress, all low-cut, slinky and sinfully short.

I shook my head and brushed past them toward the door.

A black Versace hung from a hook there. It wasn't as revealing as the others—which wasn't saying much—but it had an edge and a sense of classiness to it that the others lacked.

It almost felt like it was calling my name.

I ran my fingertips over the golden buttons that went down the dress' front and watched them glimmer in the light.

I could actually see myself in this dress. Or, at least, a version of myself.

The Evie who wore a dress like that would be ruthless. Fearless. No more awkwardly smiling when my thesis adviser got too drunk at the faculty Christmas party and cupped my ass while he was pretending to fix my skirt. No more staying up late to cry when Adam treated me like a sex addict when I suggested maybe we spice things up, just a little, in bed—

I blinked and took a step back, pulling my hand away from the dress like it burned.

Adam. How did I let myself get so distracted? I should have been wracking my brain for a way to apologize to him, not fantasizing about how a stupid dress might have the power to turn me into a completely different person.

“This one’s fine.” I grabbed the dress and quickly put it on. “Thank you. For everything. I’ll get the dress dry cleaned and find some way to get all of this back to you once I get home.”

“Shoes first,” the Leighs said in a chorus. They offered me three choices, and I grabbed a pair of black Louboutins with their infamous red bottoms without really thinking about it.

When I slipped them on, I wished I’d considered my choices a little more carefully. The heels were slender and must have added at least six inches to my height. Not exactly a pair of heels for running away in.

But they fit perfectly, and I wanted to be out of here as quickly as possible. Carefully considering an outfit for the world’s biggest walk of shame was like coordinating your lipstick with your ski mask before you robbed a bank.

It didn’t really matter.

What mattered was that I got away safely.

“Thank you all—and tell Luke thank you for me as well.” I wasn’t sure that Luke Dawnstar deserved my appreciation at the moment, since I was pretty sure he’d led me down the path to my own destruction to begin with, but I hadn’t been raised to be impolite. “I’ll find some way of returning them later.”

“Are you sure?” one Leigh asked.

“We should really do your hair first...” said another.

“And your make-up, for that matter...”

“I’m sure.” I pulled the door open and staggered forward in my heels. “This is all very kind, but I have some things I need to deal with.”

Like explaining myself to the man I was supposed to be saying vows to today.

The last thing I heard from them as the door closed behind me made me shiver, though.

“You’re welcome to try.”

The suite outside the bedroom was just as tastefully lavish as it had been inside. A fire crackled in a gorgeous white fireplace. Red velvet lounges were positioned around the fire, and the walls were hung with

Renaissance-era paintings—some of which, like Solomon's *Ajax and Cassandra*, I knew should have been hanging in museums somewhere. The painting of Napoleon's coronation, for instance, I was one hundred percent sure was actually on display at the Louvre.

So. Either this Luke Dawnstar character was the finest art thief who had ever lived...or he was a master forger as well as a Satan cosplayer.

Great.

I only really hesitated when I saw the books on the shelves over the fire. Even from across the room, I could tell that some of them were very old, but still in excellent condition.

If I had one true vice...it was definitely old books.

I bit my lip and crossed the room to take a closer look at just one. Just for a second.

My eyes fell on a copy of Petrarch's *Il Canzoniere*. This version still had the collection's original title, *Rerum Vulgarium Fragmenta*, on the spine.

Fragments composed in vernacular. A humble title, considering that Petrarch had written the poems inside about the love of his life, Laura, who was already married and had turned down all of Petrarch's advances.

He first saw her on Good Friday—the same day, years later, that she would die. Some scholars didn't think the two had ever even spoken to each other. Petrarch had just fallen for her at first sight and loved her ever since.

"You may pick it up, if you wish," a warm male voice called out from behind me.

I jumped and turned to find a handsome elderly man with steely gray hair standing in front of what I assumed to be the door out of the suite.

He was dressed like a butler, white gloves and all. His dark eyes twinkled as he smiled kindly at me. He bowed low, the way I imagined Buckingham Palace's staff might bow to the queen.

"It's too old to pick up without gloves on." I stepped away from the bookshelves before I let myself get sucked in again. "It just...it looked like it could be a first edition. Sorry."

"Older, actually," the butler informed me. "Those are all the original copies of the authors themselves."

"Sure they are." I tried not to roll my eyes. Author's originals...like hell they were. If it was true, that copy of *Il Canzoniere* was over six

hundred years old.

They were probably just reproductions, like the *Le Sacre de Napoléon* hanging on the wall.

This was just collection of a pretentious charlatan that I had, while blackout drunk, allegedly married last night.

Nothing more.

“Well...I was just leaving, at any rate.” I pointed to the door behind the butler. “Is that the way out, um—”

“My name is Charon,” the butler said. “And yes, that is the door to the hall.”

“Charon...” I said slowly, emphasizing both syllables.

Sure it is, I thought to myself as I clenched my fists.

Lord. Luke was even making his staff join in on his charade.

How had I ended up married to such an insufferable prick? I was beginning to think I hadn’t gotten drunk at all—to end up with a man like Luke, no matter how gorgeous he was, I must have been drugged.

I rushed out into the hall as fast as my stilettos would allow. Behind me, I heard Charon follow me out.

“Are you sure that’s wise?” he asked as I jammed my thumb against the down button outside the elevator. “I believe your husband would prefer—”

“I don’t care what Luke would prefer.” I pressed the button a few more times for good measure, then tried to tug off my mysterious new ring again. It was still stuck. It didn’t feel right leaving without leaving the ring behind, but I’d have to try to find a bathroom somewhere safe where I could soap up and try to slide it off. Maybe I could leave it for Luke at the front desk. “And please don’t call him my husband. There’s been a terrible misunderstanding. Obviously.”

Or a terrible mistake.

I watched the numbers over the elevator light up, one by one. As far as I could tell, we were on the ninth floor. It would explain why the number nine hadn’t been labeled on the telephone earlier, too.

If this Dante’s *Inferno* theme held up, that would mean that I’d managed to make it to the ninth circle—the frozen lake where those who had betrayed the trust of someone close and special to them were doomed to spend eternity.

Traitors.

My stomach churned as I realized how strangely fitting that was for me right now.

I'd betrayed my parents by coming to Vegas to get married without telling them.

I'd betrayed my friends by abandoning them last night.

And worst of all, I'd betrayed Adam. I hadn't just cheated on my fiancé last night. I'd lost my engagement ring and left him behind so I could marry another man.

It broke my heart to admit it to myself in full like that.

I had to make this right.

But first, I had to get out of this place. When I did, I could try to fix whatever I'd done. I could throw myself at the mercy of my friends, my family, and my fiancé, and do whatever I could to get out of this personal hell I'd created, once and for all.

When the elevator doors opened, it felt like salvation.

At least, it did until I saw Luke standing behind them, smirking down at me, smug as ever.

"Going somewhere?" he asked, stepping forward.

"Yes." I craned my neck to look around Luke to the elevator operator. He was short and broad, dressed like an old-timey bellhop. His eyes were, thankfully, kind. "Take me to the first floor, please. I'm leaving."

"Good luck with that." Luke stepped aside as he stared at me expectantly.

Like he was waiting to watch me fail.

Fat chance. I strode past him with my shoulders back and my head held high.

I got two whole steps before something stopped me. There was an invisible force field keeping me from entering the elevator Luke had just exited without issue. I strained against it but couldn't move forward. Only back.

I met the elevator operator's eyes. He gave me a tense smile and a tiny shrug but didn't move to help me.

"How's that working out for you, love?" Luke asked from behind me. "Still leaving?"

Slowly, I turned to glare up at Luke.

"No," I said. "I guess I'm not."

LUKE

She was too damned pretty when she was mad.

“You’re a bastard,” Evie snarled at me as I placed my hand on the small of her back and guided her back into our suite.

“You’re not the first to say it.”

“That doesn’t surprise me. I’m sure I won’t be the last.” Evie turned her glare on Charon as he opened the door for us. “Why can’t I leave?”

Charon glanced at me before answering.

I held up a hand to him.

I’ll handle this.

“We’ll leave in just a moment, if that’s what you wish,” I told Evie. “I’m a strong believer in the merits of free will, darling. But you’re hardly ready to go yet.”

“I’m ready *now*—and don’t call me darling,” she insisted as Charon closed the door behind us. “I want to go. Why won’t you let me?”

“Because you’re mine,” I said simply. “Because last night you promised to obey me, and because I told you to wait.”

She scrunched her face up, pissed off in a way she would hate to learn was positively adorable. “I don’t recall that.”

“Nor anything else. Yes, I remember. But now that my ring is on your lovely little finger—”

“It’s stuck,” Evie grumbled as she twisted it. “I’ll have to mail it to you when I can get it off again.”

“We cannot part, Evie,” I continued. I was glad the ring was stuck. It was exactly where it belonged. “We can only be parted.”

Evie stumbled forward a few steps on her heels and turned to stop in front of me. She placed her hands on her hips like she was making a stand.

If only she realized that pose only accentuated how deliciously broad her hips looked in her dress.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” she demanded. “I don’t care if you own all of Las Vegas—”

“And I do.”

“I can still file for divorce.”

“That wouldn’t be wise.”

“No?”

“No.” I took her left hand in both of mine and held it tight, even as she struggled to pull it away. “As I explained to you last night, your life is in danger, Evie. You’re safer married to me than not.”

“Can you just give me a straight answer for once?” She finally yanked her hand away, and I let it go. “No more riddles. Just honesty.”

“I’m only telling you the truth.”

“Then tell me why I’m here, Luke!”

I closed my eyes, licked my lips, and nodded.

“You’re here,” I said, “because you are more valuable to me than any amount of gold, more precious to me than all the jewels of all the lands. Including that sizeable rock I put on your finger when you promised your eternal soul to me last night.”

“Fuck my eternal soul.” Evie reached for her ring and tried to pull it off her finger once more. Her glare only deepened as she realized how futile her efforts were.

“I’d rather fuck your cunt, if it’s all the same to you.” I put my arm around her and guided her back toward the bedroom. “We do have places to be, but if you insist—”

“You will *never* have my cunt, Luke Dawnstar.”

I chuckled. “Funny—as I recall, I already have.”

She continued fiddling with the ring as I opened the bedroom door. Not being able to remove it obviously perplexed her, though she seemed too proud to admit it.

I was a little relieved about that.

The only way she was getting that ring off at this point was if she chopped the entire finger off—and I didn't want to go giving her any ideas.

Inside the bedroom, Legion was sitting on the bed admiring her nails in her singular form.

"What...where did the other two go?" Evie stopped in the middle of the room and stared Legion down. "There were three of you before, and I didn't see anyone leave..."

"We're still all here, sweetie." Legion fluffed her curls as she rose. "But sometimes, less is more. Are you ready for hair and make-up now?"

"I told you not to let her go until she was ready," I reminded Legion.

"And unfortunately, your bride is as prideful and stubborn as you are," she quipped back at me. "Unless you were hoping to come in and find her tied down..."

Now there was an idea. "Maybe later."

"How about never." At the bed, Evie had taken the liberty of tying the sheet to the end of the blanket. She grunted as she tugged the knot tight, then marched toward the window. "I think I'll skip the hair and make-up, thanks."

"You always were quite the escape artist." I admired the way her dress hugged her ass, round and firm, as she bent down to unlatch the window. "I wouldn't suggest trying that if I were you, though. It's a long climb up."

"I'm not going to the roof," she snapped at me over her shoulder. "I'm going down."

"And I'll never say no to that." I let her hear my belt clank against my thigh as I released it. "On second thought, Leigh, you can leave. Seems that my bride wants my cock in her mouth."

Legion let out a laugh as Evie turned to stare at me.

Fuck, she was gorgeous like that. Wide-eyed, flushed, and even more furious than before. And her mouth—those sweet, soft pink lips of hers, just begging to be fucked.

"I'll put your cock in my mouth when Hell freezes over," Evie spat at me. "And not a moment sooner."

I raised my fingers up, ready to snap them. "That can be arranged."

"Ugh." Evie bent down again and succeed in unlatching the window. As it swung open and she stared out of it, her shoulder tensed. "Wait. What..."

“Something wrong, love?” Slowly, I buckled my belt again.

“The Strip,” Evie breathed as the winds of Hell blew in from outside. They made her hair flow around her gorgeously, like something out of a movie. “It looks...wrong. All distorted and warped. Like it’s being reflected in water.”

“How poetic of you.” I moved to her and took her by the shoulders to shift her away from the window, then pulled it closed once more. “But away from the windows now. I wouldn’t want you to fall out.”

“I’m fine. I wasn’t going to—” Evie tore her arm from my grasp and stumbled forward precariously on her heels.

I reached out and caught her by the waist, just in the nick of time.

A second later and she would have been plunging straight out of the window—and when I took her wrist in my hand to pull her away from it again, the way her pulse was racing told me that she knew it, too.

“Oh,” she breathed, then shuddered. “Hell.”

“Hell indeed, love.” I turned her around and pointed her at Legion. “Now. Hold still.”

Evie looked unhappy about it, but she did as I asked.

Legion swept in with a little lipstick while I moved behind Evie. I cradled her head firmly with one hand while I worked the tangles out of her long, thick golden waves with a brush from the vanity.

“Ouch.” Evie flinched as I pulled the brush through a particularly tangled spot.

“My apologies.” I took her hair by my fist and worked the brush through more gently. “You do have the most beautiful hair, Evie darling, but so long like this...bit impractical, isn’t it? Must be a terror to manage.”

“Adam...he liked it long,” Evie said quietly. “I wanted to cut it, but—”

“Why not, then?” I tossed the brush onto the bed and wound the length of her hair around my hand as I reached for the knife at my hip. The blade was shining black obsidian, ragged on the edges but nonetheless, razor sharp. “Shall I take care of it now?”

“What? No!” Evie looked over her shoulder at me like I’d just offered to slit her throat. “Adam—”

“Is not your concern anymore.” Nonetheless, I sheathed my knife and pulled her hair aside. Beneath it was the smooth skin of her long, slender

neck. I brushed my lips against her nape and relished how she shivered. "You're mine now. Not his."

"As you keep cruelly reminding me." Evie tensed at my touch until I pulled my lips away again. "Where are we going that my appearance matters so much anyway? The Bellagio won't care if my hair is brushed or not. It's a Saturday in Vegas. I'm sure they've seen worse."

"We're not going to the Bellagio."

"Straight to divorce court, then?"

I laughed. "No, love. We're going to breakfast." I pulled out my pocket watch and checked the time. "Late lunch, actually. Seems we've missed the boat on breakfast by a bit."

"There." Legion patted a little powder onto Evie's nose and stepped back, looking pleased with herself. "All ready. Luckily, you didn't need much."

"She never does." I moved to the vanity and pulled the drawer open. "Just one last finishing touch."

"Let me guess." Evie huffed, exasperated. "Handcuffs."

I glanced over my shoulder and arched an eyebrow. "Would you fancy that?"

Evie crossed her arms over her chest. "No, I would not."

"Sunglasses will have to do, then." I pulled out a pair of aviators with silvery reflective lenses. "It's bright out today. Do you still have a headache?"

Evie raised her fingertips to her temple and closed her eyes. "Yes. A little."

"Then you'll want them."

"Aren't those Elvis'?" asked Legion.

I smiled as I slipped the glasses over Evie's eyes. "They are indeed."

"Oh, sure." Evie let the glasses slide down the bridge of her nose and rolled her eyes. "Just like the books outside are all authors' copies and that *Ajax and Cassandra* is really a Solomon J. Solomon."

"You don't believe me?" I asked.

"Tell the truth and I might."

I shrugged. "Technically speaking, they're mine. The King was just wearing them one night at a crossroads in Tennessee." I brushed her hair over her shoulders so it hung down her back, a waterfall of golden waves. "I just had him throw them in as part of the deal."

“God,” Evie breathed, shaking her head slightly. “You never stop, do you?”

“No, love.” I pressed a kiss to her forehead and stepped back to offer her my hand. “No, I really don’t.”

EVIE

As Charon pressed the button to the elevator for us, I hated Luke for how rich he was. Butler rich. First-edition classic novel rich. *I own Las Vegas* rich.

Adam's wealth had always made me a little uncomfortable. Growing up, my family never really had much.

But at least Adam had only ever flashed his money around when it came to other people.

He'd certainly never forced designer clothes and Elvis' own sunglasses on me like this.

But if there was one thing I was even more uncomfortable about than Luke's money, it was Luke himself.

As Luke introduced me to his elevator operator, I hated him even more for how *pretentious* he was.

"Phlegyas, *madame*," the operator said with a low bow. "At your service."

"Oh, hilarious." I snorted. Luke had even taught the poor man how to pronounce the name correctly. *Fla-gee-yas*. Mythological son of Ares and one of Dante's guides through the Inferno. Usually when it came to these things, I was the only massive nerd in the room—but Luke certainly had a way of one-upping me there.

"Is it, ma'am?" Phlegyas asked.

I crossed my arms over my chest and cocked an eyebrow. “If this is the Inferno, shouldn’t you and Charon be taking turns ferrying lovelorn poets around the River Styx?”

“We replaced the river for the elevator about a century ago when humans invented the skyscraper.” Phlegyas looked to Luke. “Shall I change it back?”

“I don’t think that will be necessary—but thank you. Just take us up to the first floor.” Luke smiled down at me. “If you’re as hungry as I am, we don’t have time to bother with a boat.”

“Down, you mean,” I corrected Luke.

“No, I don’t.”

As Phlegyas pressed the button, I seethed quietly at Luke’s side.

Keeping hold of my anger was important right now, I was quickly realizing. *The first one to get mad loses*, my father had always said.

The problem was if I didn’t keep my brain preoccupied with anger, I was afraid I’d have to admit I’d gone a completely different kind of mad.

From the priceless relics Luke was supposedly keeping in the suite, to how absolutely wrong Las Vegas had looked when I stared at it out of the window, right down to the way I didn’t seem capable of disobeying Luke when he gave me a direct order... there was something terrible going on here. Something completely insane.

Either the entire world had gone crazy while I slept last night—or I had.

Either way, I was beginning to worry that I was dealing with more than just a bad hangover after a wild night.

The fact that we were finally leaving Luke’s suite was a good sign, though. If we could get to this restaurant, it meant I might find a chance to slip away.

When I did, I’d need to locate a payphone—or beg one of the waitresses to borrow her cell. But when I did, I could finally contact Ava or one of the other girls and find out what actually happened last night.

Then—and only then—I’d figure out how to talk to Adam about all of this.

I doubted he’d believe my innocence. I wasn’t sure I believed it myself.

I was pretty sure he’d either call me nuts or leave me on the spot—or both.

Worse, I'd deserve it, too.

However badly I regretted whatever I'd done, I knew at this point, I'd fucked up bad enough that I deserved whatever I got.

The elevator lurched gently to a stop—but not quite gently enough. It made me stumble forward slightly. My ears were still ringing from my hangover, my balance was obviously off—and these six-inch Louboutins weren't helping at all.

"Take my arm, love." Luke held out his elbow. "It never feels good to fall."

I didn't want to, but I found myself reaching for him anyway.

Another direct order.

Another order I couldn't help but obey.

Damn.

As soon as my fingers curled around Luke's arm, I knew I'd made a mistake.

It felt like a wave had just come crashing down on me, the kind that twirled you around and made it hard to figure out which way was up anymore.

I reeled back a little as the wave hit, and—

"Thank you for saving me," I purred against Luke's lips. His kisses tasted like champagne. Cool, crisp and sweet.

"Oh, love. Pleasure's all mine."

His hands wound around my hips and dipped lower still, cupping my ass beneath my skirt. He squeezed it tight, then lifted me up.

It felt like flying.

I wrapped my legs around his waist and locked them into place. Through his slacks, his cock pressed stiff against my cunt. I was already gushing, burning hot and wet for him.

"Pleasure shouldn't just belong to you, Mr. Dawnstar." I moaned as Luke nipped at my neck. His tongue, hot and slick, lapped greedily against my skin as I ran my fingers through the thick, glossy waves of his dark hair. "What about my pleasure?"

"I'll see to that too, you hot-cunted little minx." He shifted my body a little higher and pulled me closer as his fingers slipped beneath my panties. "You're fucking soaked for me, Mrs. Dawnstar."

"On your orders, Mr. Dawnstar." My teeth grazed his ear as my lips fell open in a gasp. His fingertips pressed into the slickness of my folds,

delving deep. My gasps turned to moans as he pinned my clit beneath his thumb. "You did tell me to get wet before we stepped in here."

"Can I order you to come as well, I wonder?" Pangs of heat passed through my body as Luke's fingers beckoned inside me. "It's been so long, I can hardly remember."

"Knowledge is sin," I breathed, tracing the tip of my nose against his scalp.

"Mm. Then sin we must." He pulled his head back and forced my lips against his again. His tongue in my mouth was hot. Wet. Delicious. Addictive. I whimpered as he pulled it away. "When I get you up to that bed, love, I'm tearing this fucking dress off you."

"What about my panties?"

"Those next." Luke grinned against my lips. "Nothing comes between me and what I want."

"Not even me?"

"You're all I want." Luke captured my lower lip in his teeth as his thumb rolled my clit in devious little circles. "But I'll be damned if you don't come."

"Is that an order, Luke?"

Luke smirked and forced his fingers deeper within me still. "Let's find out."

"Oh, fuck!" I swore, panting as the wave finally passed.

"Something wrong, love?" Luke looked down at me with concern.

I glanced at my fingers around his arm and realized I had a death grip on it. My cheeks were on fire, and my cunt...

I blinked and looked between Luke and Phlegyas. They were staring at me like I'd just gone mad.

I wasn't entirely sure I hadn't.

I cleared my throat and removed my hand from Luke's arm so I could straighten out my skirt.

"I'm fine," I grumbled. My pussy was still throbbing like it was just on the verge of an orgasm. If I slipped my fingers against the black lace of my panties, I knew they'd be soaked through. "But...what was that?"

"As I recall, we had a fine time in here last night after our vows." Luke glanced around the elevator fondly as Phlegyas made a point of staring intently at the doors. "Maybe your memory is finally coming back to you after all."

“No,” I said quickly. I licked my lips and tried to think of football. Baseball. Any of the other sports I only pretended to understand for Adam’s sake. “Just feeling a little...weak.”

“In the knees, I imagine.” Luke offered me his arm again as the elevator doors slid open. “Let’s get some food in you, then. You look like you need it.”

EVIE

The longer I spent around Luke, the more I realized exactly how dangerous that was.

Whatever he'd slipped in my drink last night was obviously still lingering in my system. Every time I breathed in his cologne, my heart raced a little bit. And that fucking smirk of his—every time he turned it on me, my pussy ached like it was desperate to be filled.

Fuck.

As we stepped out of the elevator, the world suddenly and sharply turned. It was like being in a roller coaster—the '*you must be this tall to ride*' kind. One moment, we were upside down. The next, the soles of my Louboutins were on solid ground and we were right-side up once more.

I was no longer harboring the guilt of getting too drunk. That little flashback I'd had on the way down here and all this spinning told me everything I needed to know.

Someone had drugged me last night. Probably with ecstasy. Probably slipped in my drink by Luke himself. That would explain why I'd been so desperate to touch him. So desperate to *be* touched.

He was almost definitely a billionaire, after all. Owning a building on The Strip like this, he'd have to be. I had no doubt that men like him had access to all kinds of craftily concocted mind-altering substances.

Maybe even something stronger and more volatile than ecstasy.

He'd managed to dose me with it at some point and it had made me lose my damn mind.

"Crossing over is a little tricky at first, but you'll get used to it," Luke assured me as I found myself clinging to his arm again.

I eased my grip just a little this time. I didn't know when the world was going to spin for me like that again, but in these heels, I needed something to hold onto if it did. I was pretty sure I would have still felt a little off-kilter even without being six inches taller than normal.

Yeah. I'd *definitely* been drugged.

"I don't want to get used to this." I took my next few steps with care. "You need to tell me what you're dosing me with. Was there more of it in that water you gave me earlier? It would explain a lot."

Luke tilted his head to the side. "More of what?"

"The drugs, Luke." I wanted to slap him again for playing dumb, but I was still so dizzy I was afraid I'd miss and fall flat on my face if I tried. "I could have a bad reaction. I won't go to the cops," —I lied. That was my first stop after I got back to the girls at the Bellagio— "but you need to tell me what you've given me. Whatever you're playing at, it's not safe. It's not okay."

"Drugs?" Luke chuckled like I'd just told an amusing anecdote. "If you'd like me to procure something of that nature, I can, of course. But it's only 3:00 p.m., Evie. That would be a little gauche, don't you think?"

"I'm not asking for drugs." I couldn't believe I was having to spell this out for him. "I don't *do* drugs."

"Glad to hear it. Neither do I."

"No, you just slip them in the drinks of unsuspecting brides-to-be!"

"Ah. You think I had to force your mind into an altered state in order to make you mine. Is that it?"

"I *know* you did." It explained why none of my decisions from last night seemed like ones that I would make—whatever he'd given me had turned me into a completely different person.

Not the kind that I liked, either.

"No, love. You're wrong." Luke guided me down the hall and into a bar area that looked strangely familiar. It had an art deco design, all black leather and golden lighting. It was just dimly lit enough that I made sure to keep my sunglasses low on my nose so I could see properly. "After we order, I'll explain exactly how wrong you are."

“We’re drinking?” I eyed the glimmering rows of liquor along the wall. A handsome bartender hummed a beautifully haunting tune as he wiped down the bar. Two more men in Hawaiian shirts sat on stools on the other side of the bar, debating philosophy over beers. They had two of the longest beards I’d ever seen and seemed to be in deep disagreement over whether or not baldness was hereditary. “It’s only 3:00 p.m., Luke. That’s a little gauche, don’t you think?”

“Mm. You’re funny. I forgot how funny you can be.” Luke laughed as he drew me away from the barstool philosophers. “Limbo is a bar and a cafe. We’ll sit outside.”

“We’re in...Limbo?” I groaned as I recalled seeing that label beneath the number one on the phone in Luke’s suite. “Of course we are.”

Luke pulled my chair out for me when we got outside. It was wrought iron, just like the legs of the table in front of it. I slipped into my seat as Luke pushed the chair in behind me.

His classy gentleman act was incredibly believable—for a man who roofied oblivious, vulnerable women, anyway.

We were the only other diners outside Limbo except for a man sitting a few tables away from us. He wore dark, round glasses and a rumpled white shirt. I could almost hear him mumbling to himself as he scribbled away on a scroll of tan paper.

“Has something caught your eye?” Luke asked with interest as he took the seat next to me.

“Yes, actually,” I admitted. I nodded to the table across from us. “Is that man there writing on...papyrus?”

“Him?” Luke followed my gaze to the figure hunched over the table. A long white cane for the blind rested against the wall behind him. “Good eye. The pen’s a reed too, or so I’m told.”

“Fucking hipsters,” I mumbled, looking away. “I suppose he thinks he’s writing the next Iliad.”

“Maybe,” said Luke. “Homer’s long overdue for another hit.”

“Oh, ha-ha.” I rolled my eyes and pushed my sunglasses up. Luke was right—the light was bright out here, bright enough to make the throbbing in my head even worse. That was Vegas for you, I guessed.

“What’s so funny now?” Luke asked.

“You are, Luke. Homer’s in Limbo. You’ve read Dante too. Obviously.” I made a point of not looking at him. If I even glanced at him,

he was so handsome I knew that glance would turn into staring. “Am I supposed to be impressed with you for reading?”

“You’re supposed to be in love with me. For a number of reasons.” Luke caught a waitress’ eye and waved her over. “As for impressed...well, go back in and ask Hippocrates and Aristotle. They were at the bar.”

The waitress came to the table and curtsied low to Luke. She had bronze hair pulled back in a tight bun and a neoclassical face—like something from a French painting. “Your Majesty. How may I serve you?”

My ever-present scowl deepened.

As if waitresses weren’t already expected to treat their customers enough like kings—now, this.

“We’ll have the Chilean sea bass and a bottle of Montrachet—the ‘78 Grand Cru, if you’ve got it,” Luke ordered for us.

“For you, always,” the waitress said with another curtsy.

“Actually, *he’ll* have the sea bass.” I crossed my arms on top of the table’s glossy black marble top and leaned forward. “Do you do burgers?”

The waitress glanced uncertainly at Luke, then nodded when he didn’t stop her. “We do, but—”

“I’ll have a burger, then.” Luke’s Chilean sea bass could go fuck itself, as could his fancy French wine. “Medium rare. And a Mexican Coke.”

Out of the corner of my eye beneath my shades, I caught Luke smirking again.

“Two burgers, then, Electra. Thank you,” Luke agreed. “And two Cokes.”

With a final curtsy, the waitress hurried off again. Probably to go tell Socrates to fire up the grill.

“It’s a pretty cafe,” I said after a long silence. I could feel Luke staring at me like he was hungry for something more than just burger, but I wasn’t going to give him the satisfaction of noticing it. “I like the...um, the roses.”

“These?”

Luke reached into the winding vines that climbed the trellis separating us from the next table over. He scooped up a handful of deep pink blooms that faded to white towards the middle. Their centers were a bright, sunny yellow. Far from Luke’s normal color scheme of crimson and black—but I supposed even he couldn’t control the realities of nature.

“They’re...nice.” Despite my rotten mood and my murderous hangover, I knew that staying polite until I saw my chance to make a getaway would only work in my favor.

“They’re Eglantines. Pretty and unassuming, but...ah.” He pulled his hand away and I saw a drop of something far too dark to be blood trembling on the pad of his thumb.

“Are you bleeding?” I asked, narrowing my eyes. “That doesn’t look like blood.”

“Just a little prick. I’ll show you a bigger one later, if you like.” The blood on his thumb almost seemed to shimmer before he sucked it between his lips.

The way his eyes on me intensified as he did it was...distracting. My pussy throbbed with the knowledge that between his lips, his tongue was smoothing against his skin.

“That’s the thing about roses, see.” Luke slipped his thumb from his mouth far too sensually. “You still have to mind the thorns.”

“Another metaphor.” I was glad I could hide my eye-rolling beneath the sunglasses now. I hoped he couldn’t notice it through the gap between the lenses and my face. “You’re full of those, aren’t you?”

“Not a metaphor,” Luke assured me. I didn’t know why he thought I would buy it, but there was no use arguing over it. “When the Exalted tore my wings off and threw me from heaven, I planted the first bush of these.”

“So you’re a master gardener, too.”

“Of course, love. A grower and a shower alike.” I was still doing my best not to meet his gaze, but out of the corner of my eye, I saw him wink at me. Insufferable. “I thought maybe I could climb the vines right back up to the pearly gates. Come back fighting. I knew I had to try.”

“It must have been a very tall vine.”

“Long and thick, yes.” Luke chuckled to himself, but at least this time he suppressed the wink. “It was the thorns that got me in the end, though. Traitorous little plant. They bent beneath my feet—and there I went. Falling all over again. That’s why, to this day... Look.”

He beckoned me closer, and I lowered my sunglasses as he drew a vine out from the trellis.

“They slope downward,” I said softly. I’d never noticed anything about roses before—Adam hadn’t been one for sending flowers. But sure enough, the thorns on these were pointed down. Almost like someone

really had tried to climb up them at some point. “That’s a very good story, Luke.”

“You liked it?” Luke smiled, pleased with himself.

“It was lovely,” I agreed. “But I think you’re full of shit.”

“Ah, well.” He twisted a rose from the vine before he relinquished it. Before I could pull away, he tucked it into my hair, just over my ear. “Everything was bigger back then. *Most* everything, anyway.”

“I get it.” *Ugh*. Was he getting these lines from a pick-up artist manual or something? He seemed to have one for every occasion. “You’re claiming to have a big cock. Well done.”

“Not claiming,” Luke shrugged. “Telling. If you only remember one thing about me—Good Lord, let it be that.”

“Why don’t you stop thinking with your cock and start explaining some things to me instead?” I suggested. “You can start with how you somehow managed to keep me stuck in your suite when I tried to leave.”

“How do you think I did it?”

“Electromagnetic field is my best guess right now. If they’re strong enough...” I sighed and finally looked at him dead on. “Am I right?”

Luke shook his head. “Not even close.”

I squinted at him as I finally saw him properly through the sunglasses. I was sure I hadn’t smudged the lenses—at least, not yet—but there was the strangest dark aura around him. Like the world blurred into shadows where it touched his skin.

I swallowed hard and took the sunglasses off so fast, I almost launched them off the table.

Luke frowned. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” I cleared my throat and rubbed the back of my neck. *Get it together, Evie*. “Except that you keep dodging my questions and my patience ran out about an hour ago. I’m not sticking around here for much longer, Luke. Either you start talking, or I start walking.”

“Eat your burger first, at least.” Luke nodded at the waitress as she brought over our food. “And drink your Coke. Still hungover?”

I massaged my neck a little harder. “Something like that.”

“The sugar will do you good then.” Luke picked up his burger and took a bite. As he chewed, this time I was the one staring at him. No man should have looked that sexy while chewing. It just...it wasn’t right. “Of course, a fuck would do you better, but—”

“Tell me what happened last night.” I cut him off before he could bombard me with more innuendo. “Or I’m gone—and you won’t have your little science experiments to stop me this time.”

At least, I hoped not. This was Luke’s building. Who knew what nefarious things he’d done to it to keep me from walking away?

“All right then. Let’s start with how we met.” Luke pointed to the interior of Limbo. “Any of that look familiar to you?”

“No,” I said with certainty—but as I thought about it, I knew I couldn’t really be so sure about anything right now. “I remember going to a bar with my bridesmaids last night, but they all look the same to me. Dark, glowy...full of horny men and sloppy drunks.”

“I’ll have to call my interior designer, then,” Luke said. “He’ll be devastated to know his designs are so forgettable.”

“We met *in* Limbo?” I gave the area another look-around as I strained to remember—but I was still drawing a blank. “Here?”

“At the bar, yes. You were with your friends, as you said. Lovely girls, but...” Luke’s eyes locked on mine. “They shimmered. You glowed.”

“I doubt that.” Ava, Bea and Joan were all supermodel hot. I was cat-hoarding librarian pretty, at best.

“You did,” Luke assured me. “Radiantly. Could’ve found you in a pitch-dark room.”

“Charming,” I deadpanned.

That was the annoying thing, though.

Luke was.

Under any other circumstances than these, on what was shaping up to be the worst day of my life, Luke’s words might have moved me. What girl didn’t want to be called radiant? Who didn’t want to be talked about like that—by a man who looked like *him*, no less?

Today of all days, though—with Luke, of all people...

I reached for my burger, only for Luke to reach out and stop me before I could take a bite.

“Oh, what now?” I pulled my burger away from him. “I thought you wanted me to eat.”

“I do. But there are onions.” Luke leaned forward and pulled the top bun off the burger. Sure enough, there were several rings of raw red onion resting right on top of the lettuce.

“How did you—”

“You never like onions.” Luke plucked them off one by one while I watched, torn between suspicion and awe. “Can’t believe I almost forgot.”

“That’s...” Crazy. Insane. Bizarre. There were a million words, and none of them seemed quite right. I finally had to settle for gratitude instead. “Thank you. I must have told you that last night. For some... strange reason.”

“Or I know you better than anyone’s ever known you in all your life,” Luke suggested. “Better than anyone’s ever known anyone.”

“Is that so?” It sounded like more bullshit to me. Not liking onions—plenty of people didn’t. For all I knew, it was a lucky guess.

Luke nodded. “It is.”

“Okay.” I placed my burger back down. “Try me, then.”

“What do you want to know?”

“Where did I grow up?” I asked. I could hardly imagine that had come up in conversation last night.

I never talked about where I was really from—and with good reason, too.

“Vermont,” Luke said with confidence.

“Are you sure?” Finally, I had a reason to smirk too.

“And Jersey, before that.” Luke dipped a fry in ketchup and snapped it between his teeth. He returned my smirk as mine fell while he chewed. “Newark, to be exact.”

I blinked, stunned. “How did you—”

“Your mother teaches elementary school—second grade. Your father owned a moving company. Your family got chunked into witness protection, moved to Vermont after he inadvertently did some work with a mob boss. Happy?”

“Not in the least.” This was bad. *Very* bad. I lowered my voice as I spoke again. “I never talk about witness protection. No one in my family does.”

“I’m your husband, Evie,” Luke pointed out. “I *am* family now.”

An awful thought occurred to me—one that meant my first call when I got free needed to be to my parents, not Ava. “Is that what you meant earlier, when you said I was in danger? The mob tracked me down somehow last night?”

“If only.” Luke snorted. “If it was just petty criminals after you, love, I would have had their heads on pikes amongst the rose bushes behind us

before they could even think about harming a pretty hair on your lovely head.”

I scowled. Another non-answer. “I must have been pretty fucked up last night if I told you about all *that*.”

“Or you finally explained to me why I lost track of you for so long,” Luke countered. “When you disappeared off the radar, I spent an entire decade searching Atlantic City for you before I finally came back to Vegas. Vermont, though...never would’ve guessed that.”

“Where in Vermont?”

“Woodstock. Pleasant little village far away from anyone who might have wanted to hurt any of you.” Luke took up his napkin and wiped his lips with it. “It was cold there and you hated it.”

I tore my gaze away from him. “So, I’m a rambling drunk and you’re a good listener. Doesn’t mean anything.”

“No?” Luke ate another fry. “How’s this, then? Your favorite singer is Bruce Springsteen.”

“Every Jersey Girl’s is. *Sha-la-la-la-la*.”

“You love Thai food.”

“Who doesn’t?”

“You drink your martinis dirty with extra olives.”

“All the better to cover up the taste of whatever you put in my drink last night, I guess.”

“Mm.” Luke licked his lips achingly slow. My pussy—a true traitor if I’d ever met one—throbbed involuntarily at the sight of his tongue. “Still beating that horse, are you?”

“Because that’s what happened.” I didn’t know why I was playing this game with him. It wasn’t getting us anywhere. “Tell me something worth listening to and maybe I’ll stop.”

“Right.” Luke closed his eyes, drew in a breath, then nodded. “Your favorite color is the sky just before a thunderstorm. You sleep best when you’re near the ocean. You think being landlocked is the only reason we have dreams. You learned Latin in Catholic school and taught yourself Italian during your undergrad so you could read the menus without embarrassing yourself when you went to Rome for your study abroad.”

“That’s—” *Impossible for you to know*, I wanted to say, but Luke was still going.

“The first time you read Dante in his own language, you were so moved you drew yourself a bath and had an orgasm against the hot water rushing from the tap,” Luke went on. My cheeks were catching fire now. I’d never told anyone that—drunk or not. “You hate the color of your eyes because it’s too indescribable and you’re afraid no one will ever write poetry about it. You hate your nose because you’ve never seen another like yours in a magazine. Your greatest sin is that you blame things on yourself even when you know they’re not your fault—”

“Luke,” I hissed, blushing red now. “Please—”

“And when you come for me—” Luke’s eyes were aflame again, so full of fire and yet still so pale— “Which you do often. You beg me to kiss you—but you like it when I bite your neck instead even more.”

“Luke!” I hissed even louder, leaning across the table. “What if someone hears you?”

“If it’s not true, then it doesn’t matter.” Luke leaned back in his chair. For once, he wasn’t smirking, but he still looked so smug it didn’t really count. “And if it is—”

“Why are you telling me all this?”

“Because you asked, love. And because I want you to trust me. To believe me.”

“Why would I trust you?” I wrapped my arms around my ribs, suddenly feeling more vulnerable than I’d ever felt. “Now you just seem like a...like a stalker.” *Or a mind reader.*

“Because if you trust me, I think I can make you remember.” Luke nodded at Limbo. “There in the elevator, you recalled something from last night. You can pretend that you didn’t, but by now I think you’ve realized that you can’t lie to me.”

“I can’t lie when you’ve already dug up everything about me, can I?” I was on the defensive now more than ever and I could feel it. If we’d been fencing, Luke’s rapier would have been pointed straight at my throat and mine would have been quivering point-down in the ground all the way across the street. “Who does your intel, Luke? They must be former MI6—they’re good.”

“That’s not it and you know it.”

“I don’t know anything.” I glanced down at my burger, but suddenly I wasn’t hungry anymore. I took a sip of my Coke instead. Annoyingly, as

Luke had predicted, the sugar helped my headache a little. “You’re the man with all the information.”

“Then let me show it to you. Let me in.”

“How?”

Luke’s smile spread across his gorgeous lips like a desert coming into full bloom.

“Like this,” he said, raising up out of his chair.

He leaned over the table and placed a kiss against my cheek, right over the little starburst tattoo I’d somehow acquired last night.

My entire body lit up all over again as he did it. A greedy warmth swept through me like a rising tide, hungry and unfurling. Insatiable.

When he drew away, I blinked as the sensation receded again.

“I...” I looked around, waiting for a flashback to hit me like it had back in the elevator—but it didn’t. “Nothing’s happening.”

“No?” Luke looked like he was still waiting for something, but whatever it was, it didn’t arrive.

“Nope.” I shrugged. “I guess even you can’t work miracles.”

“Miracles aren’t really my style.” Luke arched a dark, thick eyebrow. “I could try biting your neck instead, if you prefer.”

I shoved my chair back and shook my head at him as I rose.

“I’m not fucking you, Luke. And I don’t trust you. Not even a little.”

“You’re leaving?” Luke pushed his chair back like he planned on following.

“No,” I told him. “Sit back down. I’m going to the ladies’ room—if that’s all right with you?”

Luke glanced around, then nodded once as he lowered himself back into his chair.

“Come right back, then. You can eat your meal and we can try something else.”

“Sure.” I turned and high-tailed it back inside Limbo.

Coming right back wasn’t in the cards, though.

That was three times now that I’d let him kiss me.

Three too many, as far as I was concerned.

As soon as I was out of Luke’s sight, I was out of here.

If I couldn’t slip out the back unnoticed, I’d ask the bartender for an angel shot on the rocks—something that Joan had once told me to order if I was ever out on a date and didn’t feel safe.

Assuming the bartender wasn't as adoringly subservient to Luke as our waitress had been, he'd call me a cab without asking any questions.

Then, this would be over. This part of today, at least.

After I was out of Luke's clutches, I could start piecing my life back together. Not through his magical kisses and infernal metaphors, but the old-fashioned way.

I'd get to my friends and we'd put together the puzzle of last night ourselves.

But as soon as I stepped foot back inside the bar, I felt the air ripple around me. My breath caught in my chest and my brain felt like someone had just stirred it with a cocktail spoon.

It was like walking into a memory.

Just like that, my plan went straight to...well, to Hell.

EVIE

Somewhere In A Memory...

The cork popped from the champagne bottle like a gunshot. Frothy foam gushed up from the bottle's mouth and the girls all cheered.

"Evie?" Joan offered me the first glass. The way her brown eyes sparkled and her winged eyeliner flicked out, dagger-sharp, it made her grin look especially wicked.

"I'm good." I furrowed my brow and swiped my thesis notes away from my phone's screen so I could try to refresh my messages again. Still nothing new. Yet. "You all should go ahead."

"Eves...you promised there'd be drinking." Ava nudged me with her elbow as she reached over me to grab a glass from Joan. Her glossy brown hair swung down over her shoulder in a long, thick braid and her thin, gold-framed glasses flashed in the bar's low lights. "The night before your wedding is no time to be showing disregard for vows."

"I promised you *one* drink." I caught the bartender's eye. "A dirty martini, please."

"Extra olives," the girls all added in unison, laughing gently.

The bartender stared at me for a long moment, then nodded. When he reached for the vodka, he didn't pour it into a cocktail shaker—he just

walked off with it.

“Weird,” I mumbled under my breath as I turned back to my phone.

Adam should have texted by now.

Normally, that wouldn’t be a problem. We weren’t exactly attached at the hip. We’d gone days without texting before.

But tonight—the night before our wedding...

It was starting to bother me that I hadn’t gotten a single message from him since the plane had left LAX.

“We should count ourselves lucky that we even managed to drag Eves out of her room tonight.” Bea smoothed down her bright copper finger waves with one hand and held out her champagne glass for Joan to fill with the other. “If she had it her way, we’d all be watching *Pride and Prejudice* in our pajamas over Pad Ka Prow and egg rolls.”

“And she’d still be on her phone up there, too.” Joan set the champagne bottle aside and placed her hand over the screen of my phone. “Put it on silent, Eves. This is your bachelorette party. Whatever’s on that little idiot device of yours, surely it can wait until morning.”

“Sorry.” I brushed my hair out of my face and placed my phone on the bar next to the champagne bottle, face down. “I know I’m being an ungrateful dick—but I’m really not meaning to.”

“Eves, c’mon. You brought *books* with you. To a bar. During your bachelorette party.” Ava tapped the cover of my copy of Dante, which was sitting on top of *Pride and Prejudice* on my lap. “We know you don’t really want to be out tonight. Just give us enough time to make a toast and finish our drinks, then we can head back to the Bellagio. Okay?”

“Of course,” I said.

This night was really more for the girls than it was for me anyway.

I knew they weren’t thrilled about my wedding plans—but they’d come all this way for me despite that.

I needed to at least play along for an hour or two.

The bartender finally returned with my martini glass in hand. I wrapped my fingers around it then looked to each of the girls.

“All right,” I said. “Toast away. I’ll behave.”

“Behaving isn’t the point tonight,” Joan reminded me sternly—but then, she grinned as she raised her glass of champagne. “Here’s to our Eves, who has so graciously emerged from her bridal nest and allowed us one last drink with her before she becomes a wife tomorrow.”

“To Evie,” Bea echoed, raising her own glass. “You look gorgeous tonight, hon. Especially without your nose in a book for once.”

“Hey!” I laughed as I swatted at Bea’s arm. “My nose looks *best* hidden in a book, I’ll have you know.”

“We wish your marriage all the happiness of your romance novels,” Bea said, softening. “And all the passion of your Italian poets, too.”

“Hear, hear!” said Ava. She reached up and pinched my cheek. “We love you, Eves.”

“Even if we’re still a little iffy on your choice of groom,” Joan added with an eye roll.

Normally I would have defended Adam—but considering that he’d gone completely AWOL, I was beginning to think the girls were right to be iffy.

Would one message letting me know he was okay really hurt?

As the girls drank, I sipped at my martini and glanced over at my phone again.

They caught me looking at it and groaned in unison.

“Is that what you’re so worried about your phone for? Adam?” Joan asked, reaching for the phone. “If he’s picking a fight tonight of all nights, give it here. If he wants a fight, I’ll give him one.”

“You can try—but I’m not sure how far you’ll get,” I admitted. “He isn’t answering my messages. I haven’t heard from him since we left Los Angeles this morning.”

“He’s been away on business all week, hasn’t he?” Bea asked.

“He was supposed to land here from New York hours ago,” I said. “It’s probably nothing. I just...I thought he at least would have checked in.”

“It is kind of weird. Night before your wedding...in Sin City, no less...” Ava rested her champagne glass on her lap. “But kind of par for the course when it comes to Adam lately, isn’t it?”

“He *has* been kind of distant ever since he popped the question.”

I adjusted the heavy diamond engagement ring Adam had put on my finger over coffee before class one morning two months ago.

We should get married, Evelyn, he’d told me.

Stunned, I hadn’t known what to say other than, *Okay*.

“What do you think is up with him?” Ava asked.

“He’s probably just...stressed about work.” At least, that was what I *hoped*.

“Maybe he’s getting cold feet,” Bea said with a glower. “Bastard.”

“Maybe we should go crash *his* party and see what he’s up to.” Joan’s eyes glinted sinisterly. “I wouldn’t put it past those boys from his accounting firm to get him into trouble.”

“Absolutely not.” Ava pointed her best teacher’s finger at Joan and shook her head. “I don’t *love* Adam—no offense, Eves—”

I arched an eyebrow. “No offense? You sure about that?”

“—but he’s at his bachelor party, just like Eves is supposed to be at her bachelorette,” Ava continued. “We’re going to enjoy this. Even if it is only one drink.”

“Or two,” Bea suggested.

“Or twelve,” Joan added with a grin.

“*One*.” I had to put my foot down on this now, before the girls talked me into something that would get me in trouble come morning. “You know how much Adam cares about appearances. If I have so much as a shadow of a dark circle beneath my eyes or a single chipped nail, he’ll notice and spend our entire wedding day sulking about it.”

“Are you really one hundred percent sure on marrying this guy, Eves?” Bea reached over and placed her hand on my knee. “We trust your judgment and all—”

“Speak for yourself,” Joan grumbled.

“—but if you’re really this nervous about pissing him off...” Ava straightened my BRIDE sash, which was strapped across my dress like a beauty queen’s.

“God. You three sound like my parents.” I sighed. We’d been over this before. Many, many times. “He’s just from a different world than me. He’s Dom Perignon and I’m... Kohrs orangeade.”

“Oh, please,” Joan groaned. “You’re not orangeade.”

“You’re a dirty martini, babe,” Bea said with a gentle smile.

“Extra olives,” Ava added. “Now—for your gift...”

“You didn’t have to get me anything,” I protested as Ava reached into her purse and rifled around.

“After you splurged on these lockets for us?” Bea pulled a silver oval locket out from between her cleavage and cracked it open so I could see the picture of the four of us I’d put in each. “Let her, Eves. It’ll be fun.”

“It’s only tarot,” Ava admitted as she pulled her deck of cards from her purse. “I’ll just read you a few cards while we finish our drinks.”

“Then we can go up to Lust,” Joan said with a sinful waggle of her dark, sharp brows. “We’ll need tickets to get in, but it’s just upstairs from here. Maybe Bea can flirt with the bartender and score us some. From what I hear, it’s to die for.”

“Joan! Don’t say that!” Ava cringed as she pulled a card. She shoved it back into the deck before I could see it, but I could guess it was nothing good. “Sorry. I need to shuffle. Obviously.”

“Limbo... Lust...” I snorted. “Did you pick this location specifically to make fun of my thesis, or is this just unfortunate serendipity?”

“Ah, a lot of column A...” said Bea.

“And just a little of column B,” Joan finished. “The building’s even called the Inferno, you know. But it’s supposed to be the best place in town for some good old-fashioned debauchery.”

“Of which Eves has already informed us we’ll be denied.” Ava let out a tiny, pleased laugh and nodded as she laid three new cards out on the bar. “There, Eves. Have a look at your future.”

“The Lovers,” I said as Ava tapped her finger against the first card. It showed a naked man and woman holding hands beneath an angel in a beautiful garden. “That’s...good, then, right?”

“Perfect, actually.” Ava snickered. “It’s the two of you—Adam and Evie.”

“Ugh. Don’t start in on *that* again.” When Adam and I first started dating during our undergrad, the girls had latched onto that nickname immediately. Just when I finally thought they might’ve forgotten about it, it turned out I’d thought wrong.

“And this one—the Tower.” Ava tapped the second card. “It’s...a little shakier. But still good.”

“It doesn’t look good.” I frowned as I stared down at the card. It was inverted—an upside-down tower toppling over. “Good thing I don’t believe in this shit, huh?”

“It’s reversed,” Ava explained. “Right-side up, it means...chaos, yeah. But upside down like this, it means personal transformation. A change in your life that’s been a long time coming. One that you’ve been resisting for a good while.”

“Here comes the bride,” Bea quipped as she plucked at my veil.

“What about that last one, though?” I craned my neck to get a better look at the third card. It had the characters from the Lovers card on it

again, but the angel was gone. In its place was a new character. He looked perfectly...satanic. "That *can't* be a good omen."

"I thought you didn't believe in this shit." Ava wrinkled her nose as her dark eyes twinkled. "Don't worry. It just means you're in for some wild sex on your wedding night."

"With Adam?" Joan winced. "Not likely. If we picked you up a hot male stripper, though..."

"What's it called?" I ignored Joan and I reached for the card. "The... Devil?"

"Gin and tonic, if you would, Orpheus," a deep, rich English voice purred from behind me. I turned to see a man standing there in a gorgeously cut black suit. He wore a white shirt underneath it. No tie.

His suit wasn't the only gorgeous thing about him, though. Even just in profile, I could tell he was easily one of the best-looking men I'd ever laid eyes on.

He had high, noble cheekbones, a long, straight nose and a stubbled jawline sharp enough to kill with. His lips, pillowy enough that they would have looked almost effeminate on any man who *wasn't* him, were curled upward on the side. A charming, handsome smirk.

Not that I was noticing or anything. It was just...

He was *too* handsome. Uncannily handsome.

You didn't see a man who looked like that in person every day.

It was hard not to stare. Even harder to look away.

I wasn't the only one, either. Around me, I could sense Ava, Joan, and even Bea staring at him too.

"Good evening, ladies." He turned toward us slowly, still smirking. I wondered how long he'd known we were gawking. Maybe he'd noticed from the start. "Having a good night?"

"Yes, thank you." I shoved the Devil card back at Ava as she gathered up the rest of the tarot, then shifted my books off my lap so I could stand. "We were just heading out, actually."

The girls all gave me the same look simultaneously.

It said *like hell we were!*

I gave them each a look in return.

We didn't come here to talk to strange men. Let's go.

"That's a shame," the man said conversationally. "You've barely even touched your drink."

I raised my martini glass to him and downed the rest of it while he watched. “There. I have now.”

“I hope you’re not leaving on my account.” The man nodded to the champagne bottle on the bar between us, which still had about a glass’ worth of liquid in it. Then, his eyes wandered to the books I’d placed on the bar. “Are those yours as well?”

“Yep.” I straightened the tight white skirt of my dress, then reached for the books to pull them out of the man’s sight—but not fast enough.

“Classics,” he commented, pointing at them. “I’m in that one, you know.”

“*Pride and Prejudice*?” I shifted the books in my hands. “I wasn’t aware they were making another movie of that. Congrats.”

An actor. That explained it. Even I had to admit, this guy would make one hell of a Mr. Darcy.

I’d definitely go see it when it hit theaters, anyway.

But the man shook his head. “No. The Dante. That one.”

He pointed at the lower book, my copy of *The Divine Comedy*.

This time, I couldn’t help but laugh. “I can’t imagine they’ll be making a movie of *that*.”

Although, come to think...

He’d make one hell of a Satan, too.

“A movie. Right. That’s funny.” I didn’t see anything all *that* funny about it, but there was no time to argue with him on the subject of my sense of humor—or lack thereof. He struck out his hand to me. “Luke Dawnstar. CEO of Adversary Industries.”

I hesitated, but around me, I could feel the girls holding their breaths waiting for me to shake his hand. He had a broad, masculine palm and long, elegant fingers. More like a sculptor’s hands than a CEO’s.

“Evelyn St. John.” I took his hand and tried to shake it, but he turned my fingers downward before I could and slowly—intentionally—he raised my knuckles to his lips.

They were hot. Not like, sexy hot—though that was, admittedly, also true—but temperature-wise.

They almost...burned.

“Pretty name.” His breath lingered over my skin before he lowered my hand again. “Evil and sin, built right into it. It suits you.”

“So I’ve been told.” Nearly every day for the entirety of Catholic school by Sister Mary Martha, an ancient, scowling nun who’d been convinced that *evil* and *sin* were my only noticeable qualities.

Though, to be fair, she *had* caught me stealing communion wafers from the rectory on my first day of kindergarten, I supposed.

“Are you in Vegas for long?” Luke asked.

“I’m getting married tomorrow.” It didn’t answer the question he’d asked me, but it answered the one I sensed lurking beneath it.

“That’s tomorrow,” he said. “What about tonight?”

Thankfully, at that moment, my phone finally buzzed. Adam’s name lit up with a message alert on the screen.

Saved by the bell.

“Excuse me,” I told him. I grabbed the phone as quickly as I could and turned away from him.

“Is it Adam?” Ava asked.

“Yeah, but...” I frowned as I opened the message.

Gulf duck ever bake, it read. *In pointy deck...*

A bunch of emoticons followed, like they’d been chosen at random.

“Oof.” Joan clicked her tongue as she read the message over my shoulder. “Well, that explains the radio silence, then.”

“Let me see.” Bea eased the phone from my fingers and read the message herself. “Oh, lord. He’s *drrrrr-unk*.”

“Looks like he’s screwing up the auto-correct,” Ava said as she took my phone from Bea. “Or trying to compose you some Dadaist poetry, maybe...”

“Your groom, I take it?” Luke asked me. *Crap*. Of course, he could hear everything we’d been saying. He was standing right there—even though, if he had any common decency, he would’ve read the fucking room, grabbed his drink and left already. “All the better reason you should let me show you around town tonight.”

“We’re all right, but thanks.” I looked at the girls and tilted my head toward the door as covertly as I could. They all just stared at me, wide-eyed.

I knew that look, too.

It said, *How dare you ruin this excellent opportunity for us? For yourself!*

This time, the look I shot back at them was tinged with a little more annoyance.

I'm engaged to be married tomorrow, my look said. You want to go with him, be my guests. But I'm out.

"That's a shame. But if you change your mind..." Luke reached into his jacket and pulled out four tickets.

He laid them on the bar in front of me. They were fancy looking. High-end, bright white cardstock with red script lettering on them.

LUST VIP, each ticket read.

"Give them to the elevator operator," Luke instructed. "He'll take you right down."

"Like I said, we're leaving now." I gave him my most polite *don't push it, buddy* smile. "I'm sure you'll find some other girls to give them to."

"It would be a waste." Luke tapped the tickets. "These are for you."

I froze as he took my hand again. He was tall enough that, as he sat on the bar stool, we were just about the same height.

He leaned in slow enough for me to pull away, but for some stupid, moonstruck reason, I didn't.

Apparently, he thought that was my way of giving him permission.

This time, his lips brushed against my cheek. The burning was more pronounced than when he'd kissed my hand. I could practically feel the knots of anxiety sliding from my muscles all over my body. My brain lit up like it did when I took my first sip of morning coffee after an all-nighter, and my cunt—

I didn't need to be thinking with my cunt right now.

Not around *him*.

"I'd like to see you again, Evelyn St. John," he purred against my ear as he pulled away. "But I'd like to see that tight little dress of yours in the fountain at the Bellagio even more."

LUKE

She walked into Limbo like a trapped little kitten already on the prowl for a means to escape.

I let her. There was only one way out of Limbo—the same way I’d carried her in last night. Purring sweetly and cradled in my arms.

To leave here, she’d have to come back to me first.

But as Evie reached the bar, she paused abruptly and stared at the back wall.

For several seconds, she didn’t move at all.

When she finally did, she looked around the bar like she was searching for someone who’d just broken a bottle over her head. Her cheeks were flushed as she glanced over her shoulder and caught my gaze.

With her arms crossed over her chest, Evie slunk back over to the table and sat down in her chair once more.

“How was the ladies’ room?” I was kind enough to keep the laughter from my voice.

“I don’t know.” Evie blinked. She looked completely dazed. “I didn’t make it.”

“Goodness.” My smirk couldn’t be forced back this time. “Should I alert the waitress to grab a mop?”

Evie blinked again, then scowled at me. That little joke at her expense was enough to snap her out of her trance.

“You’re a dick.” She picked one of the abandoned rings of onion off of her plate and threw it at me. I didn’t even flinch as it sailed past my ear and disappeared into the roses at my back. “What was that? Did you drug my Coke too?”

“No. But you should have a little more of it,” I prompted her. “I imagine when you stop blushing, you’re going to be looking pale all over again.”

Obediently, she took the glass bottle, slick with condensation, into her elegant little hands and sipped at it through the straw.

“It doesn’t taste like you’ve drugged it,” she admitted as she placed the bottle back on the table. “Not gritty enough.”

“I’m a little concerned about how much you know about Rohypnol, darling.”

“Joan dragged me to a bunch of anti-date rape seminars during our undergrad,” Evie explained. “But if you had that waitress dose this with... I don’t know, acid, or GHB...”

“No. No drugs, I’m afraid.” I smiled serenely and leaned back in my chair. “Cross my heart and hope to...well, I can’t *die*, but I’m not lying.”

“You’re always lying.”

“Not to you, love.” I snagged another chip from my plate. They were crispy and perfectly salted—nothing like the ones you got from the chippies in London. Very American—just like her. “Your burger is getting cold, Evie. Why don’t you have a bit of it and tell me what happened in there.”

I could see the wheels turning behind her eyes as she looked for some excuse to tell me no.

Was she always this uncooperative? I couldn’t quite remember. Our last time together had been far too short—and, as I recalled, too tinted by actual drugs.

The sixties truly had been an era all of their own.

Finally, Evie grabbed a knife and cut her burger in half with it. She ate her way through the half voraciously, occasionally even letting out a few cock-achingly pleased moans, before she reached for her napkin and dabbed her lips with it.

“I think...I just had a vision,” she told me as she placed the napkin aside. “Not like, a psychic vision... maybe that’s not the right word.”

“A flashback?” I suggested.

“Sort of. But...not just a memory. It was all so real. Visceral. Like I was back there in Limbo all over again, only it was last night.” She glanced away from me and pursed her lips. “When we met.”

“I was charming, I hope. I was certainly trying to be.”

“You were an ass.” Evie’s blush, which had finally been fading, reared back up to full brightness again. “You told me you wanted to tear me out of my dress and throw it in the Bellagio’s fountain.”

“An excellent idea. We can pencil it in for later, if you like.”

“See, that’s how I know it was real.” Evie gave me a look of utter disdain. “You were an ass then and you’re still an ass now.”

“At least I’m consistent. What else happened?”

“You should know, shouldn’t you?” Evie pointed out. “If it *was* real, you were there last night too.”

“Good point.” I reached across the table to snag some of her ketchup. I’d used up all of mine already. “But indulge me anyway.”

A tiny growl rumbled in Evie’s throat. Adorable. She took the other half of her burger in her hands and polished it off before she spoke again.

She was cute when she ate. Hungry, and not ashamed about it.

It was a good look for her.

But the whole time, I could also see her struggling to make sense of all this.

Poor, gorgeous creature.

She’d been through so much over the last twenty-four hours.

Unfortunately, if she wanted to remember all of last night, she’d still have to go through so much more.

“I think something’s wrong with Adam,” she finally said. “He sent me a bunch of nonsensical messages last night. The girls thought he was drunk, but... I don’t think so. He doesn’t drink. Not like that.”

“Not that you know of.”

“I’ve lived with him for the last year. I think I’d know of *that*.”

“Mm. But *what happens in Vegas...*” I tilted my head to the side slightly. “You don’t think that Adam being drunk might explain all of this?”

“How? *I’m* the one who woke up hungover in bed with another man this morning.”

“Perhaps his inebriation gave you exactly the reason you needed to fuck me last night.”

“He’d never get *that* drunk.”

“Maybe he did something that he shouldn’t have,” I continued. “Maybe he betrayed your trust, broke your heart and sent you running straight into my warm, strong, open arms.”

“He. Wouldn’t. Do. That.” Evie’s gaze was all daggers.

“How can you be so sure?”

“I’m marrying him, Luke,” she shot back at me. “I know him better than anyone.”

“No, love. You didn’t know that man at all—and you’re not marrying anyone.” I tapped the blackened gold band around my ring finger. “You’re already married. To me. Quite happily, I think, once you’re finished fighting me about it.”

A certain sadness sank into Evie’s gaze as she stared at the ring on my finger. When she tore her gaze away, it was only to glance down at the wedding ring she now wore on her own hand.

“Maybe he’s hurt,” she whispered. Even she didn’t sound so sure of that now. “Maybe something happened. Something went wrong.”

“I understand that you don’t remember any of it, Evie. But as someone who does...” I reached into my pocket. “I wish I could express to you how little you need to worry about that pathetic worm of a man you once called a fiancé. He doesn’t deserve your concern.”

“He’s the love of my life, you bastard.” Evie’s temper flared up again. Gorgeously.

It was almost unfair, how lovely she was when she felt rage. It colored her differently, made her eyes gleam so darkly and her lips curl like a warrior’s heading into battle.

When she was angry, she was no longer simply human. She became a tidal wave. A thunderstorm.

A temper like hers could change the world.

“Call him, then.” I pulled my phone out and slid it across the table toward her. “If he’s the love of your life, I imagine you remember his number.”

“Of course I do.” Evie snatched the phone up and quickly keyed the digits in. But before she pressed send, she paused.

“Not sure you’ve gotten it right?” I asked.

“No...it’s not that.” Evie bit her lip as she stared down at the screen. “I just...I don’t know what to say to him. I need to apologize, obviously. But

I don't even know everything that I'm apologizing for."

"No true remorse without full knowledge," I agreed. "You could always let him know you're on the way to the wedding venue—right after you make a quick stop at the courthouse to file for divorce, like you keep threatening."

"It's not a threat." Evie shook her head and pushed the button to place the call. "And you don't need to be so cruel."

"What can I say, love? I'm a cruel man." And a possessive one. If I was being unkind to her right now—and I supposed to her, it must have seemed that way—it was only because it made my chest flood with flame to imagine any scenario in which Evie ever had to speak to that thick-headed ingrate ever again. "Is it ringing?"

"It is. Shut up."

I obeyed. But as the silence stretched out and Evie continued to clutch my phone to her cheek without any sign of an answer, it hurt me that I couldn't offer her any words of comfort to make up for my coldness a few moments ago.

Her face said it all as she lowered the phone and pressed the END CALL button.

She'd swallowed her pride and faced her greatest fear of this morning when she dialed that number.

And he hadn't even bothered to pick up in return.

"Here." She pushed my phone back at me. "Take it."

Silently, I took the phone and tucked it back into the pocket of my slacks.

"I suppose you have something pithy to say to me now," Eve said after a long moment of quiet.

I merely stared at her.

Shut up, she'd told me.

I wasn't about to disobey.

"Luke," she said sternly after several more moments of silence. "Say something."

"What can I say?" I offered her a twitch of my lips. Not a smile or a smirk. An expression of sympathy. "You deserve better."

"I know what you want to say," she claimed.

"Do you? I'm fascinated."

"You want to say, 'I told you so.'"

“I don’t, actually.”

She could call me cruel when we were in bed together, bodies slick with sweat as we tangled ourselves in the sheets.

She could call me cruel when her pleasure became too much and she begged for an end to it.

She could call me cruel when I told her no and made her come around my thick, hard cock all over again.

But right now?

She was right. This was no time for cruelty.

She was hurt. It was in her trembling lips, in the glassy glaze over her irises as she tried to fight back tears.

I wasn’t just cruel. I had a great capacity for kindness, too.

At least, when it came to her.

“It could have been a mistake, him not answering.” That was generous. If Adam was still even living—and I would have liked it very much if he wasn’t—he was almost certainly too cowardly to answer any call he got today. Especially after his transgressions of last night. “Strange number. Not in his contacts. Maybe he’s too busy out looking for you to notice his phone.”

“You don’t need to be patronizing either, Luke.”

“Do you want to try him again?” I pulled the phone back out and offered it to her. “Or maybe one of his groomsmen instead.”

“I don’t know their numbers,” said Evie. She reached for the phone anyway—but paused. “But...maybe I could call Ava. My friend from last night. I know you saw her with me, but I don’t think I introduced her.”

“In the bar? No, you didn’t. Not then.” I matched her sad, lonely smile as I pressed the phone back into her hand. “You did later, but in the bar... I only had eyes for you.”

“Yeah. Thanks.” Evie took the phone and tapped a new number into it. It only had time to ring once. “Ava? Hello?”

Faintly, I could hear another voice on the line. It was bubbly and bright. I thought I caught the sound of a little giggling as well.

“You’re at the Bellagio?” Evie looked confused. “So you haven’t been looking for me?”

Another pause as Ava answered.

“What do you mean? What the hell happened last night, Ava? I woke up in bed this morning with that man from the bar last night, Luke—” Evie

bit her lip and listened in. "Yes. I'm with him now. We're having... breakfast. Or, I guess, lunch. Ava, how drunk was I—" Her brow knitted together. "Okay. Okay. I...I should call you later, then. I think I should go."

"Happy news?" I asked as she passed the phone back to me again.

"She says we got married last night. You and me." Evie blinked several times. "That I seemed happy about it. Not drunk or drugged at all."

"You didn't ask her about Adam," I pointed out.

"I...I think I panicked a little." Slowly, she raised her hands to her face until it was completely covered by them. Her ring glimmered in the sunshine as she rubbed her eyes. When she spoke again, her voice broke, full of pain. "I don't know what happened last night, Luke. But if everything you've said has been true..."

"Of course it's true." I reached out to her and pulled her hands away from her face. "I have no reason to lie. Not to you."

"It must have been bad." There were tears in Evie's eyes now. Proper ones. Clear and true. They slipped up over her eyelashes and trembled before they streamed down her cheeks. "It must have been unforgivable, whatever he did."

"He betrayed you, Evie." I moved a hand up to her cheek and wiped her tears away with the pad of my thumb. "You gave him your heart, and he broke it. His name isn't even worthy of your pretty lips. You need to understand that."

"No. I need to *know*," Evie said firmly. "For sure. I need to know everything that happened last night."

"It's not the prettiest of stories," I admitted, "but I can tell you, if you like."

"No. I need to see it, Luke. The way you...did whatever. Made me see the moment we met. Can you do that for me? Please?"

"Are you asking me, as your husband, to show you the memories of how your ex threw your heart on the ground and stomped on it?" I almost laughed. "Now who's being cruel?"

"I'm asking you as my *friend*," Evie blinked as she wiped the rest of her tears from her eyes. "Please. We *are* friends, aren't we?"

"And so much more, love." I rose from my seat and straightened my jacket. "But if you want everything...we'll have to pick up where we left off."

“And where’s that?” Evie asked.

“Lust, darling.”

“That nightclub you were talking about last night?” Evie squinted at the brightness of The Strip and picked up her sunglasses. “It’s a little early for clubbing, don’t you think?”

“Oh, Evie.” I offered her my hand, and she took it. “When you’re married to the Devil, it’s never too early for Lust.”

EVIE

“Every time I get in this elevator, it feels like a punch to the stomach.” I pressed a hand to my belly as we stepped out on the second floor and the world turned upside down around us once more. “You ought to call an engineer.”

“Poor little thing.” Luke’s voice was warm and soothing. “It gets better with practice. Promise.”

I was clinging to Luke’s arm again for balance as he led me into Lust.

It didn’t look anything like I’d imagined it would. Every nightclub I’d ever been in had been dark and humid with flashing lights, sticky floors, and too many bodies shoved into too little space.

Lust wasn’t like that.

Lust was beyond anything I’d ever seen before.

The floor was a beautiful white marble tile swirled with shimmering gold. My shoes made pretty clicking noises that echoed gently as I moved across it.

The lighting was gently dim and golden. The walls and high ceiling were all mirrored. They made the room look infinite and multiplied all of the bodies on the dance floor into eternity.

I when I looked up and caught sight of our reflection on the ceiling, I had to try hard not to stare.

Luke and I looked...*good* together. Far too good. I’d always known I was okay looking—I was shy, not blind—but on Luke’s arm...

It was like standing next to the sun. The way he glowed, emanating charm and elegance, somehow made me look radiant as I was bathed in his light.

“Like what you see?” Luke asked.

“Yes, Luke, you’re very handsome,” I deadpanned. As if he needed to hear that.

“And you’re very beautiful, Evie. Perfect couple, aren’t we?”

“We’re not a couple.”

“No? Tell that to them, then.”

I followed Luke’s gaze to a pair of Lust’s employees, a man with a golden tray of champagne flutes and a woman with a matching tray of chocolate-covered strawberries. They were both incredibly gorgeous—and incredibly *topless*. They bowed and curtsied to us as we passed.

“I can’t believe you make all your staff do that.” Being watched was uncomfortable. Being curtsied to? It was downright eerie. “You must think very highly of yourself.”

“I don’t make my staff do anything,” Luke said as he drew me deeper into the club. “I’m the king of sin. And here, in Sin City...people know what royalty looks like when they see it.”

It was early still, but Lust was far from empty. The dance floor was packed with writhing bodies. More topless waiters and waitresses moved around the room, offering champagne and fruit to the people reclining on the ottomans.

Condoms and lube, too.

On the floor of the nightclub, there was only a little room to dance. Instead, sheer red curtains descended from the ceiling every ten feet or so. They were draped around plush suede ottomans, providing a little privacy for the people sitting inside.

Some of the ottomans were big enough for only two or three people to recline on at once, but others were huge—big enough for six or seven people. Maybe even more.

A gentle breeze wafted through the club, beckoning us in. It was pleasantly cool and refreshing, like the wind plucking at loose tendrils of hair on a warm summer day.

The breeze shifted the red curtains around the ottomans slightly as we meandered past them.

I caught a glimpse of a woman with platinum blonde curls. Her arms encircled the neck of a handsome man in a navy suit.

The woman was a dead ringer for Marilyn Monroe. The man wore an American flag pin on his lapel. They laughed together in between kisses. As he slipped the strap of her white dress off her shoulder, she threw her head back and purred, then tugged the curtains around them closed once more.

A little further in, I could hear two more lovers moaning each other's names in accents that reminded me of Rome.

"Oh, *Paolo!*"

"Mm, *Francesca...*"

I blushed as the curtains blew aside and gave me a peek at them. A mound of strawberries was piled between the woman's thighs, just barely covering her sex. The man, Paolo, picked one up between his teeth and carefully moved it to Francesca's lips, then greedily dove back in for more.

My cheeks only burned even hotter when I spotted a beautiful dark-skinned woman with a blunt bob and dark eyeliner through a gap in the curtains.

She lay on her ottoman with not one, but *two* men. They had Roman noses and short, auburn hair that curled gently against their scalps as they ran their hands up and down the length of her curvaceous body.

None of them wore any clothing at all.

Luke chuckled as he caught me staring. As soon as I heard his laugh, I looked away.

"Cleo always did love her Roman senators," Luke said. "Almost as much as Marilyn liked her playwrights and presidents. You shouldn't blush, love. It's normal to want to look."

"Is that what this place is all about, then? Some kind of...weird, horny costume party?"

"Horny, maybe. But costumes...no." Luke led me around the dance floor to another set of curtains in the back of the room. They were pooled around a white marble pedestal with a small set of steps leading up to it. "Lust is a place for lovers. The forbidden kind. It gives them a refuge from the world that seeks to keep them apart, be it in life or in death."

"You're kidding." Luke took my hand and helped me up the steps. I glanced back at the curtains around the ottoman where the dark-skinned

woman was presumably still being ravished by those men as I climbed. “You really think I’m going to believe that was *actually* Cleopatra?”

“Would it even be the strangest thing I’ve asked you to believe today?”

“No,” I said with a glower. Luke followed me up the steps then pulled the curtains aside to reveal yet another ottoman. This one was all black. “I guess not.”

“Belief is a powerful thing, love.” Luke sat down on the ottoman and patted the place next to him. “You can have as little or as much faith in whatever you like here in the Inferno—but if seeing is believing, you only need to look and trust your eyes.”

“It’s not my eyes I don’t trust. It’s you.” I stared at the ottoman for a moment as a wicked thought crossed my mind. Luke had been kind to me today—when he wasn’t trying to seduce me, anyway—but I still hadn’t been able to escape the sensation that he was fucking with me. Every little comment he made felt like it was part of a grand joke at my expense that had spiraled completely out of control.

I eyed his lap and considered draping myself across it. It was what everyone else was doing in this club, apparently—and I had to admit, it might be nice to be the one fucking with *him* for once.

“You welcome to it, if you like.” Luke smirked as his gaze slid up and down my body. He scooted back further on the ottoman, until he was lying down, then beckoned me toward him with a twitch of his finger. It was like he’d read my mind. *Again*. “I always did like it best when you were on top.”

“I think I’ll stand,” I said quickly.

So much for going on the offensive. When it came to Luke, I was playing defense all the time.

“Your feet will get tired in those shoes before long,” Luke pointed out. “Kick them off and come lie next to me. You’ll be more comfortable that way.”

“Fine,” I relented—only because he had a point. My feet were used to running shoes and ballet flats, not six-inch heels. My arches ached with relief as I slipped the heels off and carefully crawled onto the ottoman next to Luke. “But keep your hands to yourself.”

“As you wish.” Luke sat up and pulled back the curtain to catch the eye of a busty brunette waitress. Her white harem pants billowed, and her hips swayed as she approached us. “Would you like a strawberry instead?”

“I’m still full from lunch.”

“Champagne then, maybe.” Luke reached for a glass of bubbly as the waitress lowered her tray for him. “Or we could go straight for the condoms, if you’d prefer.”

“I just told you to keep your hands off me,” I reminded him.

“Oh, Evie. The condom’s not for my hands.” He raised the glass of champagne toward me like he was offering me a silent toast.

“I came up here to get my memories back, Luke. Not to fuck you.”

“Just seems a shame to waste this atmosphere, is all.” Luke sipped at the champagne, then offered it to me. “If you’re not interested in the condoms, we could do it bareback. I always did love the feel of your tight, hot cunt wrapped around my cock with nothing between us but your honey to guide me in.”

All the blushing I’d done up until that moment felt like nothing at all compared to how hot my cheeks burned at *that* comment. My pussy throbbed against the lace of my panties.

I was still soaked from that vision in the elevator earlier.

Now, my cunt was so wet, I was practically swimming in it.

“Luke,” I said, a hint of warning to my voice. Unfortunately, I was distracted enough by the way I was responding to him between my thighs that my tone didn’t have quite the edge I’d hoped for.

“All right, love. I know. You want to remember.” He pushed the champagne at me again. “But if you want that, you’ll need to drink.”

“I’m not getting drunk in here with you.” I held my hand up and pushed the glass away. “As if you haven’t already taken advantage of me enough...”

“When I’m taking advantage of you, Evie, you’ll know it.” He tilted the glass toward me. “Just a sip.”

Slowly, I wound my fingers around the glass’ stem. Luke’s own fingers brushed against mine as he relinquished it to me, and my pussy throbbed even harder.

It didn’t feel like my body was even mine to control anymore.

“Fuck,” I swore softly. “That’s it, isn’t it?”

“Something wrong? The champagne, maybe?” Luke arched an eyebrow. “It’s a Perrier-Jouët...but I’m sure there’s a bottle of Dom Perignon floating around here somewhere if you’d like that instead.”

“No. I mean...you’ve hypnotized me, haven’t you?” It seemed almost silly to say out loud, but this *was* Vegas. Con artists, magicians, hypnotists...this was their ultimate stomping ground.

I was sure that crazier things had happened in the City of Sin.

“An interesting theory.” Luke’s tone felt almost patronizing as he gestured for me to go on. “How did you come to that conclusion?”

“That kiss on my cheek earlier, and the champagne you’re pushing on me now... You’ve hypnotized me. You set up... triggers, or something. That’s how I went from trying to get the hell away from you in Limbo last night to marrying you and waking up in your bed this morning. That’s why Ava remembered me being happy about the wedding. You made me act like that. You *made* me screw everything up.”

“The only screwing you’ve done in the past twenty-four hours was done of your own free will when we consummated our vows.” Luke’s face was serene. The amusement in his voice was gone. He looked...serious. Dead serious. “You made no mistakes last night. You didn’t slip up. You weren’t fooled, or tricked—or hypnotized, for that matter. I’m not sure you’re even capable of screwing up, love.”

“I’m sure I am,” I countered. “My first mistake was letting you play that dirty little mind trick on me in Limbo last night. My latest is following you up here and indulging you while you continue to mess around with my head.”

“I didn’t hypnotize you, Evie. Every decision you made last night, you made in perfectly good conscience. Completely in line with your silly morals and values and sense of reason.” Luke paused to stare at me for a moment. The intensity in his eyes was distracting. Even when he was just looking at me, my body was desperately straining against my better judgment to push him down, shove my panties aside and start riding his face. “Even when you didn’t need to.”

“Prove it, then.” I forced the words through my teeth. “I’m tired of games, Luke.”

“Then stop playing them.” He nodded at the champagne in my hand. “Drink. Just a taste. Drink and remember. Once you do, I think you’ll be able to remove this ridiculous notion of hypnotism from your mind.”

I wanted to keep fighting him on it, but even if I was right and he *had* messed with my brain somehow...

A scene from Upton Sinclair's *Metropolis* came to mind—a part about a gambling addict who knew that the game he was playing was rigged against him but kept playing anyway.

Was I addicted to Luke?

No.

Yes.

Maybe.

But he held the only thread I could pull right now that had any chance of leading me to the truth.

Was the game crooked?

Of course it was.

But it was the only game in town.

The champagne bubbled up over my lips and fizzed when it hit my tongue. The taste was crisp and light, with only the slightest hint of alcohol beneath soft, sweet lemon and fresh, juicy peach.

I closed my eyes and swallowed it down like it was sacramental wine.

Before I could take another sip, it all came flooding back to me.

Another memory.

Hopefully, the one that could pull this mystery together once and for all.

Somewhere In A Memory...

The gentle scent of jasmine wafted in on the breeze. Sultry sitar music stirred the air around me, beckoning me to dance—but I didn't feel like dancing.

I felt like folding my body in on itself and blinking out of existence.

I felt like crying, maybe, but I knew it would only make me feel more pathetic. Even worse.

"You don't *know* that he's screwing around on you, Eves." Ava smoothed my hair away from my face and tucked it behind my ear. "That picture might not mean anything."

Ava's phone rested between the four of us on the black ottoman. A musclebound waiter had led us here when the elevator operator had handed him our VIP tickets.

We all clung to the glasses of champagne the waiter had provided us with. Mine was already a quarter empty.

My plans for *just one drink* tonight had gone straight out the window when, halfway back to the Bellagio, Ava had checked the Instagram and found a post from Mal, one of Adam's groomsmen.

The offending picture—one of Mal looking dashing as ever as he smoked a cigarette in front of a strip club—still glowed up at us from Ava’s screen.

The club’s sign read *PARADISE* in bright pink cursive, bookended by two neon palm trees. To Mal’s side, I could see Adam in the shot, too. His arms were draped around the shoulders of his two other groomsmen, Mike and Gabe, as they entered the club.

Mal had posted the picture about twenty minutes ago.

Which meant that Adam was currently not only drunk, but already inside.

It shouldn’t have mattered. I should have guessed that a place like that was *exactly* where Adam’s bachelor party would end up one way or another.

But something still felt...*wrong*.

Adam was obviously already trashed, and going to strip clubs tonight...

It felt like something we should have at least discussed first.

Maybe that was my fault.

I hadn’t even thought to ask.

“Well, it’s definitely a gentleman’s club.” Joan tossed her own phone down next to Ava’s with a scowl. “Just Googled it.”

“*Feeling lost?*” Bea picked Joan’s phone up and read the club’s tagline from its website. “*Between the svelte thighs of our lovely angels, Paradise can always be found.*”

“It sounds like a brothel.” I tore my eyes away from the picture on Ava’s phone and stared at my hands, which were clenched into fists around my champagne glass on my lap.

“It’s just a strip club, Evie.” Joan jutted her thumb toward a hallway beyond the crimson curtains that cocooned us. “I think there’s one here in Lust too, if you wanna go tit for tat.”

“Plenty of tits and tats to go around here.” Bea pulled the curtain back to admire the built shoulders of another shirtless waiter. He had a winding serpent tattooed down his spine that rippled and writhed as his muscles shifted beneath his skin. “If Adam’s letting loose before he takes up the old ball and chain, maybe you should too.”

“I don’t want to be a ball and chain.” Or anything else that implied I was somehow tying Adam down and forcing him to spend the rest of his

life with me, for that matter.

Was that what had driven him to Paradise? Did I really make him feel trapped?

“What do you want to be, then?” Ava asked.

“A wife,” I said with a sad little shrug. “A confidante. A friend. Marriage shouldn’t feel like...” *Prison*. “Like *that*.”

“How should it feel then?” Ava asked. “For you, I mean.”

“Like... freedom,” I said softly. That only made my heart ache more. Apparently for Adam, freedom meant stripteases and angels’ thighs.

“How’s that even work?” Joan reached out through the curtain and snagged a strawberry from the tray of a passing waitress. “I don’t see how pledging your love and eternal obedience to some man would make any woman feel free.”

“Your women’s studies degree is showing, Joan,” Bea joked.

“It’s freedom because...because you’re giving yourself to someone else willingly,” I explained. “You’re not being forced to spend your lives together. You’re choosing to love and obey and...and whatever else.”

“Freedom from dating apps, sleazy dudes spewing tired old pick-up lines in dark bars...” Ava sighed. “I get it. But if Adam isn’t on the same page...”

“*Ahem*. Speaking of dudes with pick-up lines at bars...” Bea nodded toward the gap through the curtain. “Your cocktail Casanova just walked in, Eves. Want me to wave him over?”

“Oh, *God* no.” I stiffened up immediately as I caught sight of Luke moving through the throngs of club-goers and topless servers. Up here in the softer, brighter light of Lust, he looked even taller, darker and handsomer than he had down in Limbo.

I grabbed hold of the curtain and pulled it shut as quickly as I could.

But not before Luke’s eyes met mine from across the room.

I shivered as the curtain fell back into place between us. Even through the sheer fabric, I could feel his gaze on my skin. Possessive. Piercing.

Like he could see the very shape and color of my soul.

“Oh, come on, Eves. If Adam’s getting his tonight, you might as well get yours,” Joan said. “What’s the big deal? The guy is obviously into you. It’s not like you’re going to fuck him.”

“You could probably use the pick-me-up of a little innocent flirtation right now,” Bea agreed. “It’ll make you feel better. And Joan’s right,

you're not about to do anything that Adam wouldn't approve of."

"I think I'd rather slip out the back and avoid this completely." I shifted to my knees and handed Ava my champagne glass. "Come on. We can sneak away and call Mal. Talking to Gabe or Mike would be like having a conversation with a brick wall, but Mal will tell us if Adam's okay."

"That's a good idea," Ava agreed almost too quickly.

Joan laughed. "Eves, you can't tempt Ava with Mal right now. That's not fair."

"Like offering an alcoholic a nice bottle of whiskey," Bea quipped.

"Hey!" Ava gave Bea a glare. "I just think he's nice, okay?"

"Nice looking, maybe." Joan placed her hand on my hip and gave me a gentle shove. "Just like this guy, Eves. Forget about Adam and go have fun. You only live once."

"Joan—"

"Go." Joan gave me a harder shove.

Suddenly, instead of crawling across the ottoman and slipping away, I was tumbling backwards right off of it.

Right into Luke Dawnstar, CEO of Adversary Industries' strong, muscular arms.

"Careful, love." His voice was a deep, dark purr in my ear as he caught me and pulled me upright. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine. Thank you." I straightened and wobbled on my heels as I regained my balance. Luke's hands were still resting on my hips, radiating warmth through the fabric of my dress. "You can let go of me now."

"I could," Luke said. "But what fun would that be?"

I turned to tell him off, but Luke responded too quickly. One of his hands shifted from my hip to capture my fingers instead.

"Dance with the Devil?" he asked. Around us, the lights dimmed, and music changed. Not to electronica, though. Growly, grinding rock 'n' roll.

"I think they warned me against that in Catholic school." I took a step back, but behind me I could hear the girls softly cheering me on.

"Dance with him, Eves!" Bea hissed.

"How many times have you complained about clubs that only play Top 40 and techno?" Joan shooed me towards Luke. "They're even playing your song."

“You like Joy Division?” Luke asked. He actually looked surprised. “Funny. You look like more of a New Order girl to me.”

“Is that who this is?” I tilted my head to the side and listened in. “Mm. ‘Dead Souls’. I’ve never heard this live version all cleaned up like this before.” I glanced around, looking for whoever was spinning the records. “You must have quite the DJ in here.”

“Or a band of demons and Ian Curtis himself.” Luke smiled down at me and shifted his body a little closer to mine. “You’re a good dancer, Evie.”

“How would you—oh.” I blinked as I realized my hips were moving to the beat. Our bodies were swaying in time to the beat of the snare. “Well. It’s a good song.”

“But you don’t seem to be enjoying it as much as you should be.” Luke and I turned slowly. I didn’t know what my body was doing. Normally, the only kind of dancing I did was stumbling clumsily around the room. But here, now, in Luke’s arms, suddenly I was graceful as could be. “Something’s wrong. What’s making a gorgeous girl like you frown like that?”

“I...” I blinked as I stopped myself from blurting out all my woes. It was like my mouth *wanted* to tell him all my troubles—even though my brain most definitely didn’t. “It’s nothing. Just a weird night.”

“Anything I can do to improve it?”

“Not unless you want to go drag my fiancé out of a strip club.” Oops. Shit. I didn’t quite catch myself in time.

“And what does he think he’s doing there?” Luke slipped his hand a little lower down my hip. “With a body like yours, I can’t imagine what he’d need any other for. Unless... are you saving it for marriage?”

“Living in sin, actually.” Much to my parents’ dismay—and occasionally, mine as well.

Adam had been my first, but he hadn’t been exactly, well...*good* at it.

“Sin? Sounds delicious.” Luke’s shoulders eased into a slow shrug. “I’ve always been a little more of a traditionalist...but to each their own.”

“Weren’t you just telling me about how you were going to tear my dress off in a fountain under an hour ago?”

“A man can always dream.” Luke turned my hand over in his and glanced down at my engagement ring. “If your fiancé is displeasing you, we could toss this ring of yours in with it.”

"I'm good," I told him.

Luke smirked. "I know you are, darling. That's the fun part."

"Ha-ha." I rolled my eyes. "One dance, and you're already thinking about corrupting me?"

"I'm thinking about breaking your fiancé's nose for disrespecting you like this."

"I mean...he's at his bachelor party." I didn't know why I was making excuses for Adam right now. A few minutes ago, I'd been tearing myself apart over the possibility of what he was doing across town in that seedy strip club—now, I was actually defending him. "I guess he's entitled to his fun."

"He already has you. Some men would kill for that kind of fun."

"And you think you count yourself among them, I suppose." I narrowed my eyes at him. "You're a forward man, Luke. Too forward, I think."

"We could do it from behind, if you'd prefer." I let out a little noise of surprise as Luke spun me around. His hands smoothed down my curves and crossed over my waist to hug my hips again as he pressed his body against my back. "Better?"

"Worse."

"Give it a moment." With the tip of his nose, Luke moved my hair away from my ear. His breath was warm and humid as he whispered against my earlobe. "How does such a careless, ungrateful man like your fiancé end up with a woman like you, anyway?"

"I don't know. He was always there, I guess." The words flowed from my lips like Luke had compelled them out. "We met during my undergrad and moved to Los Angeles at the same time while I was applying to grad schools. No matter where I went or what I did, it seemed like he was always...around. It happened naturally, I guess."

"Sounds a little unnatural to me."

"Good thing it's not any of your business, then."

"Oh, darling." Luke chuckled and shook his head slowly. "Everything is my business."

"My love life isn't."

"This fiancé, do your parents like him?"

I paused and took a step away so I could turn to face him again.

"No," I said simply. "They don't."

“But they’re supporting your upcoming nuptials anyway.” Luke’s eyebrow twitched with interest. “That’s kind of them.”

“They, um...” Luke took my hand in his and shifted my body back into the beat again. “They don’t know that I’m here, actually. They weren’t happy when we moved in together before marriage.”

“Nor should they have been.”

“What?” I couldn’t help but laugh. “You’re one to talk. I bet you have a different girl on your arm every night.”

“I could if I wanted to,” Luke said. “But no. I told you I’m old-fashioned. I’ve always been a bit of a monogamist, really.”

“You? A monogamist?” I laughed again as he pulled me closer. “Luke. You’re about half an inch away from grinding your cock against my body right now.”

“You’re about half an inch away from liking it.”

“I doubt that. I imagine you’ve only got about half an inch to work with.”

“Nine inches, actually. Not that it matters.” Luke shifted his arm behind my back and dipped me low as the song faded out. His lips hovered close to mine. *Dangerously* close. “God blesses us all in our own ways. I’ve always been of the opinion that what matters is what you do with those blessings.” He paused to breathe in. He was like a wolf, catching the scent of his prey. “I can show you, if you like.”

I blinked up at him for a moment, waiting for him to pull me back up.

“The song’s over, Luke.”

“They all end too soon. One more can’t hurt.”

The music faded back in as Luke finally pulled me back up. The new song started with a simple, slowly plucked baseline. I recognized the voice crooning over it immediately.

“Johnny Cash in a nightclub. I never thought I’d live to see the day.” I snorted. “Your DJ must be trying to drive everyone out of here.”

“You like Johnny Cash, love.”

I frowned. “You don’t know that.”

How could he *possibly* know that?

“Everyone likes Johnny Cash,” Luke assured me.

“In a nightclub, though?”

“This isn’t just any nightclub.”

“I’ve noticed.” My gaze flickered towards a topless waitress with a platter of condoms and a set of perky D-cups. “Do they wait until after midnight to bring out the double-ended dildos and riding crops, or is that more of a weeknight thing?”

“Dildos, no. I’ve never seen much point in those.”

“Of course you haven’t.” I rolled my eyes and sighed. “Mr. Nine Inches over here...”

“The riding crops, though...” Luke’s eyes glimmered wickedly. They were the color of the clouds on a sunless morning, straining to break away into clear blue skies. “Now there’s an idea.”

“Weren’t you just telling me you were a monogamist?” If it was true, he was obviously a shitty one.

“I am,” he assured me. “There’s only ever been one woman for me, love.”

“Where’s she at, then?” I made a big show of looking around the room for her. “Maybe she’d like to cut in.”

“I lost her. Many, many years ago.” The twinkle in Luke’s eyes turned a shade sadder. “Never quite recovered from it.”

“Oh.” *Awkward.* I cast my eyes down to the shine of Luke’s feet as they shifted in perfect time with mine. “I’m sorry. I’m...I’m having a rough night. I shouldn’t have said that. It was insensitive of me.”

“I don’t think you have an insensitive bone in your body, Evie.”

“How would you know?” My gaze wandered back up to meet Luke’s. It was almost unsettling, looking at him. He was too handsome not to stare at. Too handsome to look at for too long, too. Like locking my eyes on the sun itself. “You’ve only just met me.”

“Maybe I’ve met you before.”

“I think I would’ve remembered that.” Luke was many things. Forgettable wasn’t one of them.

“In a different life, then.” The song ended again as Luke raised his hand to my cheek. I turned away from him as he brushed the backs of his fingers along the curve of my cheekbone. “Looking the way you do...you truly are a once-in-a-lifetime kind of girl.”

Blood rushed to my cheeks at his touch. The music picked up again into the same sultry sitar that had been playing earlier, but my heart still felt like it was pumping to the beat of that first song. Steady, but hard.

I bit my lip and fought against how badly I wanted to be staring into Luke's eyes again.

What the hell was I doing right now? Dancing with a stranger the night before my wedding—while my own fiancé was drinking champagne off some stripper's tits across town?

"I should go." I took a step back from him.

"You should stay." His hand fell away from my cheek like the world was moving in slow motion. His fingers fell away like a plucked feather floating down to earth on the wind.

"Thank you for the dance." I clutched my hands over my lap and had the strangest, most inexplicable sense that I should curtsy to him.

Unbelievable. This wasn't the court of the fucking Sun King—so why the hell was I acting like it?

Obviously, I was losing my fucking mind.

"Eves?" Bea placed a hand on my shoulder and glanced between Luke and me. "I don't mean to interrupt, but—"

"I called Mal," Ava confessed as she appeared at my other side. "Sorry. But—"

"Adam's still at that strip club," Joan said with a glower. "Mal implied he might be, ah..."

"Misbehaving," Bea supplied.

"I was going to say, *begging to get his face kicked in*, but...sure." Joan tilted her head to the door. "The subject of cocaine was mentioned. I think we should go over."

"I don't know if..." I closed my eyes as my heart sank into my ribs and my stomach twisted like it was being wrung out between a pair of cruel hands. "Ugh. Fuck."

"Yeah..." Bea gave me a sympathetic look. "*Fuck* is right."

"Better to deal with this now than in the morning," Joan said. "Best thing about eloping is that if you call this off now, your family never has to know, right?"

"We don't have to go if you don't want to," said Ava. "But..."

"No. We should go over." I gritted my teeth and headed back over to the ottoman we'd been sitting on to grab my phone. I didn't want to go. I wanted to write this all off as a bad night, go along with tomorrow as planned and forget that any of this had ever happened.

But I couldn't.

Not without losing some part of myself in the process.

I'd let Adam talk me into this whole mess, sure. But we'd agreed on some drinks with friends. Maybe a little light gambling.

Not strippers, blow, and God only knew what else.

And if *Mal* of all people, who spent all his time in LA hosting parties for rappers and movie producers, thought that Adam was misbehaving...

No. I needed to see this for myself.

I needed to know.

"I'm going to call an Uber," I said as I returned to the girls with my phone. "Then—"

"There's no need." Luke placed his hand over my phone screen. "My driver can take you."

"That's okay." I pinched the bridge of my nose between my fingers and shook my head. Luke was handsy and far too interested in getting into my panties, but that didn't mean I needed to be rude. No matter how frustrating he was. "I mean, that's very kind of you, Luke, but—"

"Then let me be kind." Luke pressed down on my phone gently until I lowered it. "As you said, you're having a bad night, Evie. Giving you a ride is the least I can do if it might make things better."

"And we'll take it, thanks," Bea told Luke before I could turn him down again. "A ride is *exactly* what Eves needs right now."

"We'll wait outside for you." Joan grabbed my arm and pulled me toward the exit as I opened my mouth to argue. "C'mon, Eves. Let's go."

EVIE

Memory faded out and reality crashed back in like a shooting star falling dangerously toward an unprotected Earth.

“Love?” Luke’s voice purred. I was slumped on the ottoman. Luke’s arms were wrapped around me. When I blinked my eyes open, I found his face hovering just inches over mine. “Come on. Come back to me, now.”

“I’m here,” I mumbled.

I just didn’t want to be.

I wasn’t sure which was more horrible: the fact that last night had happened in the first place, or that I was having to relive it a second time with so many details still missing.

Now that I knew how things had ended up...

It wasn’t exactly impossible to fill them in.

Knowing without remembering. Yeah. That was definitely worse.

“You fainted,” Luke told me plainly. His brow was still knitted together as he stared down at me. There was a protectiveness in his gaze. “It worried me.”

“I’m fine,” I assured him. “Just a little dazed still.”

I wasn’t fine.

I was fucked.

“Right. Let’s get you back to bed, I think.” Luke caught the eye of a waiter, who came over and took the unfinished glass of champagne. “That

memory hit you hard. You need to rest now.”

“No. I’m fine. Really.” I eased myself up out of Luke’s arms and rubbed my eyes. “But can we—”

“Anything,” Luke promised. “Anything at all.”

“Just...can we get out of here?” I glanced around the room through the red of the curtains around us. I’d left the memory behind, but it lingered unsettlingly. I had a feeling it would for as long as we were in this place. “Wherever you want—but I think the sitar music is starting to make me a little sick.”

“Of course.” Luke got up from the ottoman, then took my hand and pulled me to my feet as well. He was strong enough, I imagined he could have swept me off my feet and carried me anywhere in Vegas I wanted.

The annoying thing was I couldn’t imagine anywhere I’d rather be right now than back in bed.

Luke’s bed.

As I slipped my heels back on, he kept hold of my hands so I wouldn’t lose my balance. Once I was no longer barefoot, he shifted his hand to the small of my back.

“We’ll head upstairs, get you out of those clothes and off your feet for the night.”

“Luke...” I sighed. “I know your whole bit is about how good you’re gonna fuck me and everything, but I’m a little heartbroken over here. I don’t think this is really the time.”

“Keep your clothes on then.” Luke guided me toward the elevator with his arm around me and his fingertips at my elbow. “There are things to do in bed other than fucking, love.”

“Even for you?”

“Even for me. That wasn’t a come-on,” Luke assured me. “It was concern. You need to rest.”

I probably should have insisted on going back to the Bellagio again. Or at least booking into my own room here in the Inferno.

But as the pounding in my head roared painfully, even worse than it had been when I woke up this morning...

I wasn’t sure that I could stomach a ride all the way to a different hotel. And even if it *was* the Devil’s own bed like Luke kept claiming, lying beneath the blankets on Luke’s comfy mattress was last place I’d been today where I’d felt safe.

I sighed.

As much as I hated to admit it, Luke was probably right.

“Okay,” I said quietly. “Then let’s rest.”

The doors to the elevator parted. Phlegyas was standing there waiting for us with a warm smile and a deep bow. I tried to return the smile, but I couldn’t quite force it.

I’d forced a lot of smiles in my life. Once upon a time, I’d considered myself to be pretty good at it.

But apparently, I wasn’t anymore.

Phlegyas took the elevator to the ninth floor. As I tried to ground myself on any sensation other than dread and focused on my body, I had the strangest feeling that we were going down, not up.

Just like Luke had been saying all along.

When the elevator doors opened again, I slumped abruptly as my knees went weak.

“Love?” Luke took me by the elbow and placed his other hand on the small of my back. His voice was full of concern.

“I’m fine,” I assured him—but my headache was quickly becoming skull-splitting and my body felt incredibly heavy. I placed my fingertips at my temple and closed my eyes. “I guess remembering takes a lot out of a girl—and this headache isn’t helping.”

“Poor kitten. You’ve been through so much.” Luke stared down at me for a moment, then dipped to sweep me off my feet so quickly, by the time I realized he was lifting me, I was already in his arms.

“What are you doing?” I mumbled against his chest.

“Carrying you. Isn’t that obvious?” Luke gave Phlegyas a nod and received a smile in return as he swept me out of the elevator and into the hall.

“Why?” I asked, trying to fight back a yawn. Luke’s body was always so damned warm. Tucked against his chest like this, it was like being cuddled up to a heated blanket. “I can walk just fine, Luke.”

“And yet, carrying you is so much more pleasurable.”

Charon was waiting for us in the hall in front of Luke’s suite—dressed, same as ever, in his black coattails and white gloves. He bowed low to Luke then opened the door for us. He held it so we could pass through.

“Is the lady unwell, Your Majesty?” Charon asked Luke.

“Only worn out, Charon. We thank you for your concern,” Luke answered.

Worn out was an understatement.

I was too exhausted to even be annoyed about the way Luke made his butler address him.

The pain behind my eyes felt like my skull was full of daggers. Keeping them closed was the only way to dull the stabbing sensation—and even then, only a little.

Every time I opened them, the pain roared back to life...

But it did give me another chance to look at him.

Luke took me into the bedroom and laid me down on the bed.

“There.” Luke fluffed the pillow beneath my head and almost turned away—but then he paused. As he bowed down, he hovered over me and arranged my hair across the pillow, smoothing it down until it lay flat. “That’s better, isn’t it?”

“Much,” I admitted. It was embarrassing to be so weak all of a sudden...but between the headache and the memory, I supposed I had plenty to feel weak about. “I don’t suppose I could have some water.”

“Of course. Painkillers too, I think.” Luke moved to the bar cart and poured me a glass. He let it rest on the cart while he grabbed a glass bottle and shook some pills into his hand. His lips were missing their usual smirk as he brought the glass and the pills over to the bed for me. Instead, he only looked concerned. “Here.”

“Thank you, Luke.” For once, I wasn’t just being polite.

For once, I actually meant it.

While I swallowed down the pills and chased them with a sip of the icy water, Luke moved to the light switch by the door.

“And finally...dark.” Luke flipped the lights off and the room went almost completely black. As he moved to the curtains and pulled them shut, he banished the rest of the light from the room.

Total darkness followed and I breathed a sigh of relief.

“Better?”

“Much,” I mumbled. “I think the lights were killing me even more than the sitar music was.”

“That’s what you think all this is?” Luke sat on the edge of the bed near my feet. He pulled them into his lap and slipped off my heels, then tossed them onto the floor. “Lights and sitar?”

"I think it's a migraine, Luke." I'd never had one before, but my mother had a couple every year. The light and sound sensitivity, the weakness, the pain behind my eyes...it fit the bill, anyway.

"I agree," Luke said, to my surprise.

"You do?"

"I do." Luke reached up beneath my skirt. I held my breath as he unhooked the garter belt from one of my stockings. His hands slid down my thigh as he pulled the dark, sheer fabric off me. This, too, Luke tossed aside. "But I also think it's more than that."

I clenched my eyes shut.

He was right. He was often right, apparently. But I couldn't deal with that right now.

Now that I had my memory of what had happened in Lust, I had a very good idea of how last night had ended.

I just didn't like the idea of what Luke might make me remember next.

"Luke..."

"Shh. I know. This isn't the time." He pulled my other stocking off me, then took my foot into his hands and started massaging my arch.

I sighed and relaxed as Luke's thumbs pressed against the tight, knotted muscles in my foot. Wobbling around in those ankle-breaking heels all day, my feet were aching almost as bad as my head was.

But every moment Luke was touching me, I could feel that tension being released.

"You must think I'm a coward," I said quietly.

"Why would I think something so silly as that?"

"For not facing whatever's next. I'm not faking being sick to avoid reality, though."

"I never said you were."

"And I'm not stupid, either."

"No, love." Luke shifted his massage efforts to my other foot. "No, you're not."

"I know..." I sighed. I didn't *know* anything anymore. "I mean, I can guess at what I stumbled in on when we went to Paradise last night. If it was bad enough for me to break up with Adam over..."

"I can still show you darling," Luke offered. "Though, I have to admit that I'd rather not."

“That’s why I’m a coward, though.” I winced as Luke started to work out an especially tight knot in my arch. “I don’t...I don’t know that I can handle seeing my relationship unravel all over again.”

“Then you don’t have to,” Luke said simply.

“I don’t?”

Luke pressed against the knot firmly, and just like all the others, I felt it slowly release as well. “No, Evie. Not if you don’t want to. You have free will here, remember?”

“Unless I want to leave.” It was a stupid thing to bring up. For the moment, being here in this dark room having my feet rubbed by my captor was actually the only thing I wanted.

But the point still stood.

“You still want to leave me?” Luke chuckled softly. “I still have so much left to show you, though.”

“I don’t want the memory of catching Adam cheating on me, Luke.” I bit my lip as I heard the words come out of my mouth.

Before I’d said them, it had just been a guess. A maybe. A *probably*, really...

But now that I’d spoken them out loud, I’d made them real.

I pulled my feet off Luke’s lap and curled up onto my side.

“So let me show you better things.” Luke shifted up on the bed to lie behind me. He didn’t wrap his arms around me, which I almost regretted—I probably could have used a hug right now—but I could feel the way his breath stirred my hair as he laid his head on the pillow next to mine. “There are six more levels of the Inferno you have yet to discover. Dinner at Indulgence, shopping at Illusion...”

“Gambling at Avarice?” I guessed, remembering the labels on the phone I’d seen that morning. “That all sounds lovely, Luke—but not for me. I don’t think I’m going to be able to gamble away my pain.”

“It works for plenty of others,” Luke pointed out. “But if you want something to take the pain away... What about the memory of our wedding?”

I groaned and buried my face in my hands. “I still can’t believe I married you last night.”

“You were happy when you did it, too. Ava told you so herself,” Luke reminded me. He shifted closer to me, pressing his body against my back.

His lips hovered over my ear. "I've given you two unpleasant memories today. Let me give you a pleasant one for once."

"I..." I wanted to roll over and curl myself up into Luke's arms, but I couldn't quite bring myself to do it. "I don't know, Luke. Maybe the fact that I forgot everything was meant to be a blessing. Maybe if you would have just let me leave this morning, I could have walked away from all of this."

"You're smarter than that, Evie." Luke brushed my hair away from my ear and moved his lips closer still. "If you believe that ignorance is bliss, you wouldn't be doing a master's degree."

"No. You're right. I don't." I burrowed a little deeper into the pillow beneath me. "But it was nice to imagine for a little while."

"My sweet little dreamer." Luke lifted a length of my hair in his palm and raised it to his lips, kissing it. "You can decide what you want in the morning, love. For tonight, you're going to rest."

I sighed. "That...actually does sound nice."

"Then let's get you out of these clothes and into bed properly." Luke took the zipper of my dress and tugged it down to my waist.

"Luke..."

"What?"

I turned to look at him over my shoulder. I didn't even have the energy to muster up a glare. "I thought you said there were better things to do in bed than get naked."

"Only a few," Luke said. "Do you really want to sleep in this dress?"

I closed my eyes and imagined how good it might feel to have the soft sheets of the bed against my skin instead of the stiff fabric I was wearing.

"No," I said. "I guess not."

"Sit up, then," Luke told me.

With only a little sound of discomfort, I obeyed.

Luke shifted up onto his knees behind me. He finished unzipping the dress, then slid it off my shoulders.

"Better?" he breathed in my ear.

I nodded. "Almost."

Luke moved off the bed, slow and measured. He gave me time to anticipate each of his movements as he came around to kneel in front of me instead.

It was like learning a new kind of dance—a very, very private kind.

I lifted myself up off the mattress and Luke took the skirt of my dress in his hands. The fabric whispered where it brushed against the sheets as Luke pulled it away.

When Luke's arms wrapped around me to unclasp my bra, I held my breath. This was a different kind of closeness than all the others I'd had with him today. It was gentle, but the atmosphere surrounding it made it feel so tense I could hardly even bring myself to move as he slipped the straps from my arms as well.

I was about to be almost naked in front of Luke again.

And unlike this morning, I wasn't fighting it.

I didn't try to pull away.

My breasts spilled out of the bra as Luke pulled it away. They were tender from being trussed up all day, and though the room wasn't particularly cold, my nipples were stiff.

Luke hovered his hands over my tits like he wanted to grab and claim and squeeze, but he managed to control himself.

Instead, he moved his hands to my panties instead.

Again, I lifted myself up off the bed.

Again, he slipped them off and placed them on the floor.

"How's that?" His voice was barely a whisper—gruff, almost strained. I could feel his eyes sweep over my body, just for a moment.

And just for a moment, I wondered what he thought about what he saw.

The moment was broken as Luke swept the sheets and blankets back. I wiggled beneath them, and he pulled them up over my body.

He even tucked me in.

"Goodnight, Evie," he told me as he stood. "I'll see you again in the morning."

He turned and headed for the door without another word.

"You're leaving?" I blinked, surprised.

This was Luke's bed, after all. And it wasn't like him to leave me in it, completely naked, without getting in himself.

At the door, Luke paused. "You want me to stay?"

"I..." I frowned. Did I? This morning, I would have given anything in the world to be allowed a few more hours of sleep alone on this luxuriously soft bed in this gorgeously dark room. But now... "I don't think I want to be alone right now."

Luke merely nodded. My heart thudded a little harder in my chest as he reached for his belt.

He undressed slowly. I could only see the shape of him in the darkness...but it was one hell of a shape just the same.

His shoulders, broad and strong. His chest, narrowing gently to a V at his hips. His thighs, muscular and thick enough that they almost begged to be bitten. Kissed. Licked.

My headache still panged in my head like a little wind-up monkey was inside my skull bashing its tiny cymbals together—

But if it hadn't, I wondered—would I dare try and turn this innocent undressing into something more?

My body said yes. To my amazement, my brain was almost in agreement too.

It was hardly cheating. Whatever Adam had done in that club last night, it had certainly been enough to end our relationship.

And Luke and I were married. It wasn't like I could cheat on my husband with himself.

He slid beneath the covers with me, keeping just enough distance from me to make me wish there was no distance at all.

"Luke?" I whispered up into the velvety blackness that surrounded us. "Will you hold me?"

My heart pounded even harder as I waited for his answer.

Just because I'd asked for it didn't mean I wasn't still afraid of what would happen if he said yes.

But after the day I'd had, the things he'd shown me...

I was almost more afraid of how it would feel if he said no.

Luke stayed silent, but his body answered my call. He shifted closer to me, until our bodies were flush against each other. His skin, like always, was deliciously warm.

I rolled onto my side and Luke wrapped his arms around me. One arm slipped beneath my neck and wound around my ribs. The other, he draped over my hips and squeezed me tight.

"Better?" he breathed.

"Yes," I breathed back.

Our chests rose and fell in unison as our breaths aligned.

It was comfortable, being held like this.

Safe.

Exactly what I needed right now.

Exactly with him.

“You won’t leave, will you?” I asked after a few long moments of silence.

“No, love,” Luke promised. “You’re not alone.”

“I don’t want to be,” I whispered.

“Good.” His voice was a soft caress against my hear. “You’ll never have to be alone again, love. Not for as long as you’re mine.”

EVIE

I woke up slowly, like an ember gradually flaring back to life.

The first thing I noticed was that it was morning. The light from outside made the spaces around the curtains glow a gentle white.

The next thing I noticed—the important one—was that Luke’s body was still curled around mine.

“Good morning, darling.” His voice was deep and rumbling. Like the purr of a lion, still easing into the dawn of a new day.

I tried to will myself to wiggle out of his arms and get out of bed, but I couldn’t bring myself to do it.

This was too comfortable.

Too fucking right—even though I still didn’t quite understand why.

“You stayed.” I knew he’d promised to, but I was used to broken promises by now. How many times had I woken up alone in Adam’s bed only to find him out on the couch, taking an early morning phone call or clicking away at his laptop, completely oblivious to the fact that he’d left me in bed alone?

“Of course I did. You asked me to.” Luke traced the curve of my shoulder up the length of my neck with the tip of his nose. “And I did vow to obey.”

“That wasn’t an order, though,” I pointed out. “Just...a request.”

“One I chose to honor.” Luke pressed a little kiss to my earlobe. “I don’t need to be ordered to give you what you want.”

I closed my eyes for just a little longer. It felt like we'd slept for an eternity, and even though I felt rested, I could have easily stayed there in that bed all day long anyway.

I don't need to be ordered to give you what you want. What a sweet sentiment that was—one that I'd hardly believed possible before just now.

"What if I still don't know what I want?"

Luke ran his hand from my hip down the length of my thigh. Instinctively, I arched my back and pressed my ass against him.

"Your body seems to have some idea, love." Luke chuckled. "As does mine."

His cock was hard against me in an instant. *Nine inches*, he'd told me in that memory.

I might have teased him about it then, but now...

That felt about right.

"You know I'm not talking about sex, Luke."

"And it's a shame you're not." Luke rolled me onto my back in his arms and propped himself up so he could stare down at me. "When we do fuck, every realm in this universe shivers with pleasure as well."

"Luke."

"I know." He patted my cheek softly and kissed the opposite cheekbone. "But we skipped dinner last night, and you only had a quick shower yesterday. Let's give your brain and body both a chance to wake up before you go making any big decisions."

Luke kissed my neck, and I didn't try to stop him. Where his kisses had only annoyed me yesterday, today...

They actually felt kind of nice.

"Here's what we're going to do," he murmured against my skin. "I'm going to have Charon bring up some breakfast, and then I'm going to draw you a bath."

"And what am I supposed to do?" I asked as Luke reached for the phone on the nightstand. He pressed the button for Indulgence and held the receiver to his ear.

"You, love, are going to stay right here in this bed until I come get you." Luke smoothed the blankets down over the curves of my body, then turned his attention to the phone. "Breakfast to the royal suite, Ciacco. Croissants, some fresh fruit, bacon..."

“Coffee,” I pleaded in a whisper. Just thinking about sipping something warm and strong and caffeinated made my entire brain light up.

“And a big pot of coffee,” Luke repeated my request into the phone. “The Sumatran light roast with sugar and cream. Have Charon bring it up when it’s ready.”

Luke hung up the phone and gave me a smile.

“Stay,” Luke told me. “I’ll get you when it’s ready.”

Then he was up out of bed and striding toward the bathroom—giving me a magnificent view of his perfect ass as he walked away.

I closed my eyes, snuggled beneath the blankets, and listened to the sound of the water rushing into the bathtub for a little while.

It was cozy—too cozy.

“Evie?”

I blinked my eyes open again. I must have drifted back off, because when I felt Luke’s fingertips brushing my hair away from my face and pulling the blankets away from my body, it felt like no time had passed at all.

Luke was dressed in a dark linen robe. His stubble looked especially gorgeous in this low lighting, and his eyes were soft and still a little sleepy looking.

He took my hand and guided me to the bathroom. A thin layer of steam had coated the mirror and the cool tiles of the floor. Our breakfast was arranged on a little cart near the tub, right next to a marble chess set on a table just a little bit taller than the tub’s edge.

Luke held onto me a little tighter as we crossed toward it all.

It was probably a good thing, too. The floor was a little slippery with condensation, and the last thing I needed right now was to fall and crack my head open—although, I supposed if I did, at least I’d have a different set of problems.

Maybe dealing with a cracked skull would be better than facing reality right now.

“How’s your head?” Luke asked as he helped me into the tub. The water was just the right temperature—exactly on the verge of almost being too hot.

“Better,” I said with a sigh of relief. “I guess you were right—I needed rest.”

“Bubbles?” Luke reached for two glass vials on the edge of the tub by the wall. One was filled with a dark red liquid that looked like wine, only thicker. The other was golden and shimmered in the bathroom’s gentle light. “I have rose garden at midnight and sunshine in the meadow.”

“What does sunshine in the meadow even smell like?” They both sounded more like places or scenes than scents.

Luke smiled and tipped the golden vial into the tub. The liquid trickled in and bloomed into thick, fragrant bubbles as soon as it hit the water, no agitation required.

The scent was bright, but not citrusy. Floral, but earthy too. I could smell a warm breeze sweeping across dark green grass—more than just smell it, actually. I could feel it too, plucking at my hair and washing over my skin.

I felt warm—not just the warmth of the water around me, but on my cheeks too. Like I was sitting in the sun.

“How...” I breathed.

Luke shrugged. “Another magic trick, I suppose.”

I swallowed and sank a little deeper into the bath.

If this was a magic trick, Luke was the best illusionist in the entire world.

“Soap up.” Luke placed the vial back down on the edge of the tub and nudged a pure white bar of soap towards me with his knuckles. “I’ll make your coffee while you wash.”

“I HAVEN’T PLAYED chess in years,” I admitted. “I used to be good at it when I was younger, though.”

“Take the white, then.” Luke turned the table so the white pieces were facing me. “Let’s play.”

I reached for the middle pawn in front of my queen but paused and narrowed my eyes before I grabbed it.

“Isn’t there some kind of warning against playing games against the Devil?”

“You’re finally catching on.” Luke smirked. “I’m never against making things interesting.”

“Okay.” I closed my eyes, then nodded. “If I win, you take me to Paradise so I can remember what Adam did to make me break up with him last night.”

“Are you sure?”

“You were right last night.” I hated to admit it, but Luke often was. “Ignorance isn’t bliss. I need to know. To be sure I wasn’t just...anxious and blowing things out of proportion. I need to know that he deserved what I did.”

“That’s fair,” Luke agreed. “Though, I’m not eager to take you out Above, I’ll admit. The treaty should still be standing, but—”

“What treaty?” Luke had mentioned it several times already. This seemed like as good of time as any to ask.

Luke’s smirk softened into a smile. “Tell you what. For every piece of mine you take, I’ll answer one of your questions. For every piece of yours I take, you answer one of mine.”

“And if you win?” Not that I would let him. I might have been rusty, but I didn’t play games I expected to lose.

“If I win,” Luke said, his eyes locked on mine. “Then I show you our wedding instead.”

I bit my lip. I wasn’t sure what I was more afraid of remembering—Adam’s transgressions or my vows.

“Okay.” I moved my pawn up two spaces—a standard opening move. “You’re on.”

I grabbed the bar of soap and worked it over my arms while Luke pondered his next move. The soap glided over my skin, creamy and sleek like cold silk.

I smirked as he moved the black pawn in front of one of his bishops. My fingers slipped against my knight. I set it into place, just in front of my row of pawns. Luke moved out his opposite knight—and just like that, the game was on.

“Sicilian Defense into the Italian Game?” Luke laughed as I moved my bishop across the board. “Did you learn that in Rome?”

“I’m an only child. I learned it playing against the computers at school when Sister Mary Martha took my recess away.” We moved our next few pieces quickly, and Luke captured one of my pawns. “That counts as your first question, by the way.”

“Firm, but fair.” Luke’s eyes fell to the edge of the water, where the bubbles were gathered around my breasts. “Very much like you.”

“Stop.” I splashed water at him and took his knight while he wiped his face dry. “Now, you answer one of my questions. What’s this treaty you

keep talking about?”

“The treaty is almost as ancient as our love. It’s between Heaven and Hell, regarding, well...” Luke reached for a croissant and took a bite, then held it against my lips. I bit into it tentatively. It was buttery and just a little sweet. Crisp on the outside, soft within. “Regarding you.”

“Me?”

“Your safety, Evie. I’ve told you you’re in danger on Earth. As passionately as I love you, the angels who rule Heaven and roam Earth want you dead.”

“Why?” I asked, but Luke shook his head.

“Take another of my pieces and I’ll tell you.”

It took several more moves—and several more bites shared from Luke’s croissant—before I managed to claim one of Luke’s pawns with my rook.

“Why do these so-called angels want me dead?” I asked. “Everything I know about angels—if they even exist—suggests that they’re supposed to...I don’t know. Drive around in a red Cadillac and give guidance to people who are at a crossroads in their lives. Not kill innocent humans.”

Luke chuckled. “That’s the plot of *Touched by an Angel*, darling. You really shouldn’t trust everything you see on television. I invented it for a reason, you know.”

“You did not invent—” I started to snap at him, but the invention of television seemed like a stupid thing to argue about. Even by Luke’s and my standards. “Still, angels aren’t supposed to kill people. What reason could they have to kill me?”

Luke sighed and reached for the bacon. “They want you dead because I love you. Deeply. Ardentlly. And exclusively. Always have. Always will.”

“Angels don’t seem like the type to try to break up true love.” Luke offered me the bacon, and I bit down on it. Crispy, salty, and just the perfect amount of grease.

“Angels do whatever they need to in order to secure their grand designs.” Luke took a bite of the strip of bacon for himself.

“Which are?”

“Take another piece first.”

I moved my pieces with care, but this time, Luke claimed my bishop before I could make another conquest.

“My turn,” he said.

I popped my foot up on the edge of the tub and began soaping up my calf. "Go ahead."

"You're not pushing me away anymore. Don't think I haven't noticed."

"That's not a question, Luke." I focused a little harder on the suds forming on my calf, hoping that Luke wouldn't also notice my cheeks flushing pink.

"Why aren't you?"

I glanced to the edge of the tub, where a silver safety razor rested along with the other bath supplies. My legs weren't exactly full-on Amazon rain forest yet, but if I went more than a day or two without shaving them, they'd get there soon.

When I reached for the razor, Luke beat me to it.

"Let me," he said, pressing the edge of the blade against my ankle. "You just focus on answering. I don't think I need to tell you not to lie."

"Because..." I clenched my jaw.

Because you're hot and British and even if you're a little insane, you make my cunt throb and I've always liked the idea of fucking Mr. Darcy, I could have told him. Because you're pushy and I'm tired and it's easier to let you have what you want without fighting you at every turn.

Both were technically true.

But they weren't *the* truth.

"Because it feels good to have you close," I finally answered. That was about as true as it got. "Because it's not very easy to feel safe right now, but I feel a lot safer when you're around."

"Wonder why that might be?" Luke chuckled as he moved the razor up my calf to my knee.

"Take another of my pieces and find out."

But with Luke distracted as he shaved my legs for me, it was becoming easier for me to best him.

"What do these *angels* want?" I couldn't believe that I was actually entertaining Luke's delusions about angels and demons, Heaven and Hell...

But the breeze that had appeared with the bubbles was still gently blowing through my hair, and I could still feel sunshine kissing my cheeks—even though there was no open window in sight.

Something had to explain all of this.

I needed to figure out what that something was.

“First, to punish me for my rebellion against Heaven by keeping you from me,” Luke said slowly. He set the razor aside as he finished shaving my first leg, then reached into the water for the other and began soaping it up as well. “Then, to begin a war great enough to overthrow Hell, eradicate every demon within it, slaughter my comrades among the Fallen, and return humans to their original state.”

Which is? I wanted to ask, but I knew better than that.

There were more pressing questions to ask right now.

As I claimed another of Luke’s pieces, I settled on a better question.

“What are the treaty’s terms, then?”

“It’s simple, really.” Luke moved the razor up my calf with focused precision. When I felt up my other leg, it was so smooth it was like there’d never been hair on it to begin with. “But you should know something outside of the treaty first.”

“Okay.” I was careful not to ask him to explain. I didn’t want to waste a question. “Go on, then.”

“No agent of Hell can harm a human in Heaven—and no agent of Heaven can harm a human in Hell. That’s why you’re safest here. No matter what happens, for as long as you’re human, no angel can hurt you while you’re in my domain.”

Which meant that, as far as Luke was concerned, we were in Hell. It would explain the wonky elevator physics and the strange look of The Strip outside the window...

But I wasn’t ready to buy any of this just yet.

“Now, as for the treaty itself...it’s simple, really.” Luke lifted my leg up to run the razor down the back of my calf. “No living human can be taken to Heaven or Hell against their will. The dead rarely have a choice between the two and may be forced to go wherever will take them, but for as long as a human lives, they cannot be dragged into either realm by force or else the treaty is broken.”

“But if you want me in...in *Hell*...” It still sounded ridiculous, but I had to push through that. “Why not just kill me?”

“Because you don’t die like normal humans, love.” Luke wasn’t even smirking when I met his eyes. He looked entirely serious. “I’ll give you that one for free.”

“Thank you,” I said slowly, even though it only created even more questions.

If I didn't die like other humans...what did that even mean?

"The treaty also stipulates that no agent of Heaven or Hell can directly harm a human on Earth unless the first part of the treaty is broken." Luke frowned. "Directly being the key word. As they say, accidents happen—and some accidents are far less accidental than others."

"Uh-huh." I kept quiet as we played our next few moves. Luke was playing carelessly now. It was like he *wanted* me to win. I claimed my next piece, a rook, quickly. "What happens when the treaty is broken?"

"All hell breaks loose."

"Luke. Be serious."

"War, Evie." Luke swished the razor in the water and tucked my leg back into the tub. Just like the other, it was silky smooth. "If I bring you here to Hell against your will, inevitably you escape, and the angels retaliate. Once they're able to harm humans on Earth, battles are fought as they try to kill you and I try to stop them. Every great war ever fought has been fought over you."

"That's...that doesn't make sense, though." I frowned. "I'm twenty-five, Luke. Not seventy-five. The last great war was, what? World War II?"

"There was a little with Vietnam," Luke admitted. "But I lost you so quickly last time, that conflict was predominantly just fallout from your death."

"How could that possibly have been because of me?"

We played several more moves until I could claim Luke's other knight. Only then did Luke answer.

"Because you don't die like other humans, Evie," he said again. "Instead of going to Heaven or Hell or Valhalla or anywhere else—instead, you're reincarnated."

I blinked at him. "I'm...*what*?"

"Reborn," said Luke. "And when you are, the treaty is reinstated until—invariably—the angels find you, or I do, and it's broken all over again."

I couldn't help it.

I laughed.

"Something funny, love?"

"Yes, *love*." I gathered up a handful of bubbles and blew them in Luke's face. "I gotta admit, you almost had me there."

"Did I? Sounds lovely." Luke plunged his hand into the tub between my knees. "Shall we continue here, then? I can have you in bed instead, if

you prefer.”

I caught Luke’s wrist before his hand could dive too deep.

“Not what I meant, and you know it.”

“A man can dream.” Luke shifted his fingers into the spaces between mine and arched an eyebrow. “What *are* you on about, then?”

“Reincarnation.” I shook my head. “That’s where your story got sloppy, Luke. I thought you were the Devil—not Kali.”

“Of course I’m not Kali—but I’ve played dice with him once or twice,” Luke said casually. “He’s a clever cheater—admirable, really—but a sore loser.”

“Luke.”

“What?”

I groaned and shook my head. “Let’s just...finish the game.”

Luke released my hand and made his next move. As I studied the board, I realized I had more pieces than Luke, but he was in a far more advantageous position than me.

“Check,” he said as he moved his queen two spaces from my queen.

“You...you tricked me into taking your pieces,” I said softly. I wasn’t angry—just a little in awe. “You were luring my own pieces right where you wanted them.”

“I don’t play to lose, love.” Luke’s eyes glimmered with wickedness. “Your move.”

It was easy to get out of Luke’s check, but every time I got out, he found some way to get me back into it. For several turns, I was stuck just defending my king—until finally, we reached a point where both of us were in check with each other. Luke’s pieces blocked all of my best moves, and mine blocked all of his.

In fact, a single move from either of us would have put us both into checkmate.

“I’m afraid one of us must concede,” Luke finally said after we’d both stared at the board for several minutes. “Unless you’re willing to call this a tie?”

“If I do, will you still take me to Paradise?” This had all been a welcome distraction—and at least I’d gotten cleaned up and eaten a little in the process—but I’d made my decision.

Ignorance wasn’t bliss.

I needed to see the rest of last night for myself.

Even if it hurt.

"I don't love the idea of taking you to Paradise," Luke admitted. "As I said, it's Above, and you're safest here Below."

"But?"

"But." Luke sighed. "It is what you wish for. Perhaps even what you need." He rose and offered me his hand. "So yes. I will take you to Paradise, Evie, and I will give you the awful memory you seek."

"Thank you." I took his hand and stood up in the tub. As I climbed out of it, I knew Luke's eyes were combing over my body through the places where the bubbles weren't clinging to my skin, but I was becoming more accustomed to being stared at by Luke.

Looking the way he did, all handsome and elegant despite his smirking and his stubble, it was hard not to *want* him to look.

"But after," Luke said sternly, wrapping me up in a warm, fluffy white towel, "you'll let me show you our wedding as well. If you remember why you left that bumbling idiot, you might as well remember why you ran straight into my arms, too."

"Paradise first, though?"

Luke nodded as he worked the towel over my torso, drying me off. "Paradise first. But we're not going alone. I'll need to call Legion—maybe Moloch as well."

"Legion?" I blinked. "Moloch..."

"Yes. The former shouldn't be busy. The latter is currently still attending to your friends at the Bellagio, but I'm sure Malacoda can handle three women at once on his own. Wouldn't be the first time."

"Those are demon names."

"They are."

"You're back to your literary allusions, then." Malacoda was the leader of a band of demons in the eighth circle of Hell in *Inferno*, and Moloch—that was a name from *Paradise Lost*. One of the fallen angels who had joined in Lucifer's rebellion. He'd argued for waging full war on Heaven and God alike. "You're ripping off Milton, you know."

"Maybe. Or maybe it's time you finally just admit that your darling poets got things a little too right in their verse."

"Can't we go alone?" I sat down on the bed and pulled the towel around me tight. I hardly wanted to drag more people into this mess than I already had—and if we waited too long, I was afraid I'd lose my grit and

change my mind. “It’s just a strip club in the middle of the day. How dangerous could it be?”

“Deadly.” Luke stooped to pick up his slacks from last night. “Trust me, love. If we’re going to Paradise...” He selected a number off his phone’s contact list and pressed the call button. “We’re bringing Hell with us.”

LUKE

Evie finished off the rest of breakfast while I made my calls. First, to Legion, who agreed immediately. Then, to Malacoda—who was a little less sold on the idea.

“There’s gonna be angels waiting for you there, you know,” he warned in a faintly Southern drawl. In the background, I could hear women giggling and the sounds of tires squealing. “If you reckon you have to go Above with her, do you really need to deliver her right to Heaven’s doorstep?”

“You’re one to talk. What are you and Moloch up to with those lovely bridesmaids?” A crash sound echoed in the background. “Drag racing?”

“*Mario Kart*, actually.” He chuckled. “They’re kicking Molock’s sorry ass at it.”

“Then you’re not busy.”

“Wish I wasn’t, but I am,” Malacoda said—though he didn’t sound happy about it. “We’ve got four angels sniffin’ around in the lobby like stray dogs hopin’ for steak dinners. We’ve had one near *accident* already. Can’t risk another.”

“What?” That piece of information made me fume. It wasn’t just Evie who needed protection anymore. The angels knew who Evie’s friends were now too. Since the Exalted’s plans with Adam had been thwarted, apparently neither Evie nor her friends were safe anymore. “What happened?”

“Just a falling chandelier. We dealt with it. But until these angels leave, or Abaddon manages to rustle up the rest of your Fallen, I’m afraid your resources might be spread a little thin, chief.”

I hung up and made one final call, not on my cell, but on the landline.

Evie would need fresh clothes—and shoes she could actually manage to run in, for that matter.

If this day went straight to Heaven, I didn’t want her trying to escape an army of angels in Louboutins.

“WHAT DID you mean back there in the suite?” Evie asked an hour later. She was dressed in an Alexander McQueen tuxedo mini dress with a sheer, lacy panel between its lapels and a pair of chunky Gucci sneakers that emphasized how long and slender her legs were.

She looked gorgeous.

She always did.

“About what, love?” I swept my arm around her and kept a close eye on our surroundings as Charon pulled the limo up out in front of Limbo.

This was the first time that Evie and I had left the Inferno since I’d carried her back to it two nights ago. Now that we were properly Above, keeping Evie safe was paramount.

Safe from angels and demons, fae and jinn...and whatever else might want a piece of her.

There were a few downfalls to having such a radiant wife, I supposed.

“When you said you were *bringing hell with us*.” Evie squinted in the sunlight, then reached into her purse for the sunglasses I’d given her. “Do you mean you’re planning on...what? Causing trouble in Paradise? *Raising hell*?”

“So to speak.”

“Luke.” Evie stepped in front of me and placed a hand against my chest. Something dark and full of longing inside me purred and unfurled at her touch. “I just want to remember. I don’t want to pick a fight.”

“And we won’t be, if we’re lucky,” I promised, turning my head to the side to crack my neck in preparation. “But sometimes, love, the fight picks you.”

Legion emerged from Limbo behind us. She was in her singular form for the moment. Since we’d parted ways yesterday, she’d changed into a

pair of cat-eye shades, combat boots, tight leather pants and a jacket to match.

“I hear you two need protection.” Leigh gave Evie a smile before turning to me. “Since Mal and Lock are otherwise engaged, I gave The Fourth a call. He’s on his way now. I think his earlier engagement reached a dead end.”

“Wordplay. Funny.” I’d save my laughter for when I knew Evie’s bastard ex was truly dead, though. “Successful or no?”

“Not sure,” said Legion. “He didn’t say.”

I sighed. “He never does.”

“I think you’re both making a huge fuss over nothing.” Evie sighed. “Even if I *did* believe this stuff about your *treaty*—”

“It doesn’t matter whether you believe or not, Evie.” I gave Charon a nod as he came around to open the limo’s back door for Evie and me. I took Evie’s hand to help her into the limo, then slipped in behind her. “You don’t knock on Heaven’s door without an army at your back.”

“The Fourth and I will meet you there, Luke.” Legion patted Charon on the shoulder and grabbed the door of the limo for him while he headed back toward the driver’s seat. She smiled down at Evie and me like she expected us to begin going at each other at any moment. “You two play nice, now.”

As Legion closed the door, I knew the situation would be far from... *playing nice*. Evie was sitting close to me, but as soon as she realized her knee was touching my thigh, she moved to shift away.

I’d thought we were making progress—but apparently, we weren’t. Her refusal to believe me about the nature of the world we lived in spoke of a continued distrust I was finding hard to get around. Despite how she’d asked for me—*needed me*—last night, any attempt on my part to make her see reality only drove her away.

Which still didn’t make her any less mine.

I considered myself a good husband—but that didn’t mean I was going to take a hands-off approach about it.

“Stick to close to me while we’re up here, Evie.” I grabbed her knee before she could scoot that lovely round ass of hers too far. “You need to remember that you’re in danger until we get back to the Inferno. Even with an army behind you.”

“Leigh and her friend are hardly an army,” she pointed out. “They’re only two people. Or...I guess, depending on how many Leighs are planning on showing up...”

“Legion—Leigh—is many, and The Fourth can hold his own.” I ran my thumb up and down the curve of her kneecap. It must have felt at least a little nice, because she didn’t stop me. “Add in you and me, and I imagine we can take on whatever the angels might throw at us.”

“You and me versus angels?” Evie laughed a little nervously as the limo began to roll forward. “The only angels I know in this world are the Hell’s Angels, Luke—in which case, I’ll remind you that I’m a grad student, not a fighter.”

“We *are* Hell’s angels, love. A gang of meth-dealing bikers is below our level of concern. It’s Heaven’s angels we need to be worried about.”

“And what do Heaven’s angels deal in?” Evie raised an eyebrow and smirked. “Angel-dust?”

“Control, mostly,” I said. “The treaty still stands, so the Exalted shouldn’t be able to hurt you directly. But I wouldn’t put it past them to arrange some other kind of misfortune today.”

Evie scoffed and turned away from me to stare out the limo’s tinted windows. From outside, we were invisible, but from within, we could see everything with perfect clarity.

A rumble approached us as a motorcycle blasted past. On the back of it was Legion with her arms wrapped around The Fourth’s waist. He wore all black leather, just like she did, but where Legion had elected to ride without a helmet, his was shiny and so black it absorbed the sunlight instead of reflecting it.

“That’s the biggest man I’ve ever seen,” Evie whispered, pressing her hand up against the glass. “And why are they both...”

“Both what, love?”

Evie shifted her sunglasses down her nose, then back up the bridge again, several times. Finally, she made a tiny noise of frustration and took the glasses off completely.

“Nothing,” Evie tucked the glasses away in her purse. “It’s...it’s nothing. But I think you owe me an apology, Luke.”

“Do I?” I couldn’t imagine how I could have slighted her now, but the mood she was in, I wouldn’t be surprised if she’d come up with something anyway.

I wondered how she preferred me to make things up to her this time around. Old books, probably—but I'd always have a special place in my heart for the Roman era, when I could just bring her the heads of her enemies instead.

"You said the Hell's Angels were beneath your concerns." Evie glanced over at me, eyes full of suspicion. "But your bodyguard looks like he runs drugs across the Mexican border and burns down the clubhouses of rival gangs in his spare time."

"The Fourth isn't my bodyguard," I explained. "Isn't even infernal, actually."

"Speak plainly, Luke," Evie groaned. "For once. Please?"

"I am," I assured her. "When I rebelled, The Fourth was among those who couldn't quite choose sides. But we work together well enough."

"Sure." Evie rolled her eyes. "Does he even have a real name?"

"The Fourth is his real name."

"His Christian name, Luke. Not his call sign."

I chuckled. "That's his Christian name, more than any other. But...yes, I suppose he's known by other things. Azrael, Abdiel, Reaper, the Final Embrace, the End..."

"You're not funny, you know." Evie crossed her arms over her ribs and looked away again. "Abdiel...that's from *Paradise Lost* again, isn't it?"

"Very clever of you, love."

"An angel who considered joining Satan when he rebelled against Heaven." Evie recited the information like I was a class full of her undergrads. "But he ultimately repented before he was thrown with the rest."

"I was a little annoyed at him for it at first," I admitted. "But in the end...ah, he made the right choice for him. I made the right one for me."

"Sure." Evie curled her fingers beneath my hand—but not to hold it, unfortunately. She pulled my touch away from her knee and dropped my hand in my lap unceremoniously. "I think those poets of mine you keep plagiarizing might not take too kindly to your fanfiction, you know."

"They're very old stories—and they were mine first." Luke hummed with agreement. "Dante, I can't speak for, but who do you think told them to Milton in the first place?"

"Ugh." Evie lowered her face into her hands to muffle her groans. "Why are you so damned committed to this act? Every time I start to

believe you, I only end up feeling even dumber for considering it.”

Poor little thing. It was hard to tell if she was just in denial, or if she really hadn’t realized yet.

Either way, she would have to wise up to the truth soon.

“I am damned, yes. But it’s not an act, Evie.” I shifted off the seat and dropped to my knees in front of her. “You need to understand and accept, love... I’m the Devil. The Inferno is part of Hell. Leigh is a demon and now that we’re on Earth again, angels will be trying to kill you. Which is why...”

I reached up towards her. She tensed in anticipation. Her knees clenched together as she drew in a deep breath.

It was like she expected me to ravish her, even now as I was trying to convince her of the—deeply unsexy—reality of what we would likely face today.

For a moment, I even considered making good on those expectations. How easy it would be, to simply take her breast in my hand and squeeze it gently, then hard. To caress her curves then trail my fingers down to her lap where it would be so simple to slip my hand up that short, tight skirt...

My cock hardened and throbbed in my trousers at the thought.

We were already on our way to Paradise—but the only paradise I’d ever truly known was right there, waiting for me between Evie’s thighs.

I could ravish her here, yes. I wasn’t so sure she would have stopped me, either.

Ever since I’d first laid eyes on her in Limbo, her body had been fucking begging for it from me. If she didn’t think I noticed all the little tells she had—the way she stared at me when she thought I wasn’t looking, how she played with her hair when I paid her compliments, and that delicious scent that had been coming off of her like a perfume of her own making—

Hell. She was so worried about how I was pulling one over on her, she didn’t even stop to realize how badly she was kidding herself.

“Luke...” Evie pressed herself back against her seat like she was trying to move away from me, but I didn’t miss the way her tongue slicked across her lips as her gaze lowered to the stiffness beneath my belt.

“Buckle up.” I said as I reached for her seatbelt. I stretched it across her body and buckled her in.

A look of something—disappointment?—crossed her face. It quickly turned into a glare. “Oh, fuck off!”

I grinned as she blushed and looked away.

“Safety first.” I patted her cheek fondly and ran my thumb across the flush of red there.

Lord.

How I loved it when she burned.

“Thank you,” she said slowly after a long moment. She glanced over at the empty seat next to her. “Aren’t you going to buckle in too?”

“A car crash wouldn’t kill me, love,” I assured her. “It’s your safety I’m concerned about. Besides...” I winked at her. “I’m in a very good position right now, I think.”

“On your knees. Of course.” Evie closed her eyes and leaned into my touch ever so slightly for a moment with her cheek before she pulled away again. “In prayer, I hope.”

“I am a sinner, Evie. But from where I’m kneeling...” I slid my hand down her shoulder. “What more could even the Devil pray for right now?”

“Forgiveness, for a start.” Evie changed the subject—probably to conceal the way she shivered at my touch.

“Catholic school really did a number on you, didn’t it, love?”

“You have no idea.” Evie shook her head. “I spent twelve years of my life with bruised knuckles from Sister Mary Martha’s ruler and sore knees from kneeling in the chapel, saying my rosaries.”

“For what sin, I wonder?” I traced the lapel of her dress where it edged against the sheer lace over her tits. “Not lust, surely?”

“Existing, mostly.” Evie’s gaze followed the path of my finger. She licked her lips again—and every sight of her tongue made it that much harder not to take her here and now. “And insubordination.”

“Mm. One of my favorites.”

“I suppose if you really are the Devil, it must be.” Evie laughed softly. “You know, Luke, you really would be a catch if you would just break this—”

But before she could finish, something beneath us broke first.

“Charon?” I clambered to my feet and rapped against the partition as the limo began to fishtail. “Keep us steady!”

“We’ve blown a tire, Your Majesty,” Charon’s muffled voice shouted back at me through the opaque black glass. “Angels up ahead!”

I reeled around to face Evie again. The blush was gone from her cheeks.

Now, they were terribly pale. She looked petrified.

I moved to her quickly. If we were under attack, she had every reason to be scared.

“Shh. I’ve got you,” I purred in her ear as I folded my body over hers.

“Luke...” Evie tried to push me off of her to no avail. “You’re acting like some kind of...celestial Tommy gun is going to start firing on us at any second.”

“It’s not guns I’m worried about. The limo’s bulletproof. It’s—” I glanced out the window and saw a flash of brilliant white light. “Get down!”

I barely unbuckled Evie’s seatbelt and threw her to the floor in time.

The window next to us shattered, sending glass spraying down onto my back as we hit the floor and the limo screeched to a halt. Across the back of my neck, I felt a divine heat still sizzling as the blast dissipated.

“You all right?”

“Um...I think so.” Evie blinked beneath me. The smell of ozone was all around us, like the moment after a lightning strike. “What was that, Luke?”

“Deliverance.” I growled, annoyed. “Still happy I’m taking you to this strip club?”

“I’m...beginning to have second thoughts,” she admitted.

I pushed myself up and glanced out the window.

My jaw clenched as I saw a flutter of wings, perfect and white.

“Well, it’s too late now. Welcome to Paradise, love.” I shook my head and prepared for the worst. “Unfortunately, Heaven seems to have gotten here first.”

EVIE

Luke's scent was in my lungs. Positioned like we were, it was impossible not to breathe him in. He smelled rich, spicy and darkly golden. And beneath his cologne there was a fainter smell that was only him.

It made the weight of his body on top of mine almost bearable.

No. More than bearable.

Delicious.

Desirable.

Fucking irresistible; and fuck me for even *thinking* like that right now.

Just a few moments ago, I couldn't have been more frustrated at Luke. But now, I could imagine parting my thighs for him so easily. Scrambling with his belt, pulling his cock out, taking it inside me while whatever battle was happening outside raged around us—

Everything that was entirely inappropriate to want in that moment, I wanted with every cell in my body and every throb of my clit.

It only got worse as Luke drew back and stared down at me with that dark glimmer in his eyes, like he was thinking everything that I was—and more.

"I'm going to keep you safe, Evie." Luke stroked my cheek, then moved his lips down toward mine. "But I need something from you first."

It was that moment—on the floor of Luke's limousine while we were taking fire from, apparently, a supervillain with a death ray, that Luke

chose to kiss me.

It wasn't like the kisses he'd given me before. It was fast and hard like a drive-by shooting. Like a robbery. It certainly felt stolen. His tongue darted between my lips and flicked against mine, a little taste—one that made my back arch and my pussy ache.

The kiss ended as something exploded outside.

It reminded me, finally and completely, right down to my bones, that this was no time to be playing Seven Minutes in Heaven.

We might have been at Paradise, but whatever was going on outside sounded like Hell.

The boom of the explosion jolted some sense into me. Suddenly, I wasn't horny anymore.

Once again, I was scared.

Luke pulled away quickly. He pressed one of my wrists down on the floor of the limo and a single finger to my lips.

"You can slap me for that later," he promised. "For now, so help me God, Evie—stay down."

He rolled off me and moved to the far door of the limo, the one that seemed to be on the opposite side of the fighting. As he popped it open, he looked back for just a moment.

Even in the midst of battle, he couldn't help himself but stare.

"You look good on your back, love." In his hand, something dark red and flickering burned. A flame. Actual, honest-to-God *fire*. How, I didn't know. "You will leave this limo if you're in danger within it. But should I find you just like that when I come back, we'll revisit how fucking right that kiss felt."

Luke closed the door behind him. The limo rocked violently a few seconds later, like something heavy had just been thrown against it.

My heart was pounding. My breaths were slow, but sharp.

I felt shell-shocked.

I supposed I probably was.

My body was frozen in place. I didn't know if I couldn't move my arms or legs because I was afraid, or because Luke had given me his stupid fucking husbandly order to stay down.

When I closed my eyes and willed my body to move, I found that I could, though.

Even husbandly orders had limits, it seemed.

Little bits of glass cut into my hands as I crawled to the side of the limo that was closest to the battle. It hurt a little, but the glass was everywhere. Unavoidable. It even tumbled down from the waves of my hair as I managed to peek up out over the sharp edges of the broken window. When I tested how far I could rise up, I felt a heavy force pressing down on me if I straightened too much.

It was enough that I could finally see what was happening outside, though.

Luke stood in front of the limo, his hands full of...yes...*Flames*.

Beyond him, there were nearly a dozen Leighs grappling with men in white suits and pastel-colored shirts.

More men dressed in similar ways were dogpiling on The Fourth—to limited effect. The Fourth had two men on each of his arms, another two clinging to each leg, and another still hanging down his back with his arms around The Fourth's neck.

Not that it seemed to stop The Fourth—or even really slow him down. He threw his assailants around like they were ragdolls.

But for every man The Fourth tossed aside, two more arrived to mount a counterattack.

I had to blink and shake my head as I took in the scene. Not just because of the fire in Luke's hands, or the sheer number of Leighs present on the battlefield, or even because of how The Fourth was able to take on dozens of men at a time without fatiguing.

There was more—and it was all entirely beyond belief.

Tourists were present outside of Paradise. They moved up and down The Strip, walking hand in hand on the sidewalk and ducking into storefronts.

An exotic dancer leaned up against the outside of Paradise wearing a string bikini and smoking a cigarette as she laughed with the bouncer.

A police car drove past, barely even slowing down. It only sped up when it was well past the club—and even then, it made no sign of turning around to stop the chaos that was clearly visible—apparently, only to me.

Two mothers pushed strollers, talking and giggling like there wasn't a *Saving Private Ryan* situation going on before their very eyes.

A bachelor party meandered drunkenly towards the club with their arms around each other's shoulders, boasting about their casino winnings

even as The Fourth stumbled in front of them, completely covered in murderous combatants.

Everyone else on The Strip not participating in the battle seemed completely oblivious to the fact that it was even happening.

That was the first especially weird thing among...well, all the *other* weird things.

The second major weird thing—maybe the weirdest of all—was that several of the men that Luke, Legion and The Fourth were fighting had wings on their backs, huge and white. They flared out and flapped as some of the men took to the air—literally *flying*. Other wings fluttered down toward the ground as more men in white suits came down to join the battle from the sky itself.

“Lucifer!”

The roar of a voice cut through the din of battle. It was sharp like the blare of a trumpet, and English—not dark and rumbling like Luke’s, but crisp and posh.

Another man in a suit, this one cut from a soft blue fabric, emerged from inside Paradise. As he walked through the fighting towards Luke, a set of golden wings unfurled behind him. They glimmered in the late afternoon sun, so bright when the sunshine glared off of the rippling feathers, they seemed to actually glow.

The glow could have been a trick of the light. The wings? Some kind of mechanical...something or other, maybe.

But terror that shot through my chest as the man summoned white light into the palms of his hands told me that for once—for certain—this was no trick, and he was no man.

An angel.

I didn’t want to believe it, but I didn’t know how anything else could be true.

“Gabriel.” Luke said the angel’s name like a curse. The flames in Luke’s palms flared up to twice their previous height. “Come to surrender?”

“I was about to ask the same of you, Adversary.” I couldn’t make out Gabriel’s face from this distance, but if I could, I imagined he’d be smirking. “It’s unlike you to leave the Inferno so soon. I thought you were smarter than that.”

“Oh, yes,” Luke monotoned. “I am. I’m a very clever devil, or so they tell me. Smarter than you know.”

“Smart enough to keep your captive woman safely in Hell, I hope.” Gabriel craned his neck and looked directly at the shattered window of the limo. I ducked immediately and hoped I did it in time. “Or have you brought her along as you return again to the scene of your first crime? That’s bold, Adversary. Even for you.”

“Speak of her again and you’ll be picking your jaw up off the sidewalk like a petty gambler chasing change.” Luke’s voice was incredibly level. He didn’t growl. He didn’t roar. He spoke with a confidence that made me believe his threat was so much more than *just* a threat.

The tone of Luke’s voice told me that he had every intention of making good on those words.

I hoped his opponent realized it, too.

“She doesn’t remember, does she?” As Gabriel drew nearer, there was something familiar about him. The way he walked, maybe, or the cruel, teasing tone of his voice—though I didn’t know why. “You brought her here to remember. Despite all your charms, she forgot you completely.”

“Was it you who took those memories?” Luke tilted his head to the side, like he was puzzling out a riddle. “Who would have thought Heaven would be capable of something so cruel.”

“Not me, Adversary. If I’d entered your silly little domain, you’d still see the scars of it on my skin.” Gabriel turned his face to each side to show Luke both of his cheeks. “Do I look like I’ve been burned by hellfire and brimstone to you?”

“No,” Luke admitted. “Not yet.”

They both moved into combat so quickly, if I had blinked, I would have missed it.

Gabriel struck out his hand and shot a burst of light at Luke.

Simultaneously, Luke shot fire at Gabriel.

The two blasts met between them in a blinding flash of light. I had to hold my hand up to shield my eyes from it.

Suddenly, I wished I hadn’t taken off those sunglasses that Luke had given me.

Then again, the light was so bright that it might not have mattered.

“Well met, Adversary.” Gabriel almost sounded like he meant that. “A shame you have no ground to stand on here. Fight me if you wish—but

when I'm picking my way over your twitching corpse to slit the throat of your stolen bride, remember it was your actions that truly killed her. Not mine."

"The treaty stands, Gabriel." For the first time since this standoff began, I heard a hint of real fury in Luke's voice. "Kill her, and I'll bring Heaven itself down on your self-righteous head as retribution. The next time you blow that horn of yours, the only song you'll be playing is a funeral dirge."

"Oh, Lucifer. The treaty was broken the moment you dragged that poor, stupid woman to Hell with you." Gabriel tutted at Luke, shaking his head. "Now, you'll both pay for it—just like you always have every time before."

I gulped.

If this was a continuation of Luke's act, it was a hell of a show.

At this point, I could only *hope* that it was all an act. I clung to that hope like a drowning woman to piece of driftwood, being tossed around by a sea that wanted me dead.

"Try it, and we'll see who's picking up the tab." Luke held firm. "That woman is mine. My wife. My mate. By right—and by the free will of her own full and consenting choice."

Luke struck his hand out again—too fast for Gabriel to retaliate this time.

The fire from Luke's hand seared across Gabriel's cheek. Gabriel hissed and clutched at the burned skin the flames left in its wake.

"*Bastard!*" Gabriel roared.

"You were warned," Luke said with a shrug. He cracked his knuckles and started moving toward Gabe.

I shouldn't have been nearly so excited at the prospect of seeing Luke tear a man's jaw off—but again, the thought hit me.

This Gabriel person was no man.

"If she went willingly, it was only because your good-for-nothing demon tempted her fiancé," Gabriel snarled at Luke. "Malacoda, wasn't it? Mal, he called himself. Very funny. A spy from your demon hordes—we should have known from that smell of sulfur when he first arrived on our doorstep."

"Paradise is Heaven's turf, Gabriel." Luke shot another burst of flame at Gabriel. Gabriel only just barely deflected it in time. "Malacoda had no

power there. When your man sinned, he had no one to blame but himself.”

The next burst of flame Luke shot out was another hit—but Gabriel wasn’t trying to deflect it. Instead, Gabriel took the fire in his chest as held his hand up toward the limo. The next second, he shot a beam of sizzling hot light directly at me.

I dove to the floor and tucked my hands over my head just in time. When I felt fresh air wash over me and felt the sunshine on my knuckles, I looked up to find that Gabriel had blasted the roof of the limo clear off.

Whatever happened next between Gabriel and Luke, I missed it. I was distracted by something flying over me—a cloud of feathery white so thick that it blotted out the sun itself.

Doves.

There had to be hundreds of them. They swept across the sky, flying in formation—then a group of them broke off and dived down toward me.

For a moment, they were beautiful. Like something out of a work of art.

Then, as they neared me, their chest feathers parted and their bodies opened up, revealing huge mouths hidden beneath their plumage.

And every mouth was full of sharp, hungry teeth.

Teeth that gashed and snapped right at me.

I screamed and rolled over onto my back. My hands shot up instinctively, and something pleasantly warm began to burn in my palms.

I felt...anger. Pure, unadulterated rage—a kind that I struggled to remember ever actually feeling before.

I was angry that I’d forgotten everything from that night. I was angry that the more I saw, the closer I was to having to admit that all this time, Luke hadn’t been lying. He’d been *right*.

And in that moment, more than anything, I was angry that I was being attacked by *fucking murder-doves*.

The anger coursed through my veins, then burst out of my hands in twin columns of red-hot flames.

The doves shrieked through their horrible maws, and the smell of roasted chicken filled the air. Their bodies dropped onto the floor of the limo all around me in sick, fleshy *thunks*. The feathers were seared clean from their bodies, and their skin was charred crispy and black.

My first reaction should have been a true Steve Urkel thought—*Did I do that?*

But instead, I found myself thinking of Hitchcock.

I was a natural blonde—and ever since I’d watched Tippi Hedren fleeing from flocks of murderous fowls on the silver screen, I’d never really trusted birds.

I shoved the corpses of the doves off of me and tried to ignore the way I could still see their razor-sharp teeth.

As I straightened and tried to stand, I realized that force I’d felt earlier wasn’t pushing me down anymore.

Luke had told me to stay low and stay put as long as I was safe here—but apparently, nearly being mauled to death by a bevy of doves was a good sign that being inside the limo wasn’t safe anymore.

I shoved the limo’s door open and stumbled out of it. My body ached from the crash and stung from all the little places where the broken glass had cut through my dress and into my skin. I felt disoriented, dizzy...but somehow, powerful in spite of it.

I could still feel the warmth in my palms where, just like Luke, I’d somehow managed to summon fire in my hands.

“Stop!” I shouted as I caught sight of Luke and Gabriel still fighting. I rushed between them, and thankfully, the light in both of their hands died as I put myself directly in the line of fire.

That was stupid, maybe, but from what I’d gleaned from their conversation, the main argument seemed to be about whether or not Gabriel was allowed to kill me.

If Luke was right and the treaty hadn’t been broken, Gabriel couldn’t risk hurting me directly.

At least, for now.

“Stop,” I said again, panting. “Please.”

“Evie, get back!” Luke roared at me.

But as Gabriel folded his wings behind his back, he only gave me a smile—

A far too familiar smile.

“Evelyn,” he said with a curt little bow. “Fancy seeing you here.”

“Gabe?” I blinked, caught off guard.

Now that I could see his face, I couldn’t believe I hadn’t put two and two together earlier.

I guessed the fact that he was shooting lasers from his hands and sporting a pair of golden wings on his back had distracted me from the fact

that I knew exactly who he was.

Gabe Bright. Vice President of the company Adam worked at—and one of Adam's chosen groomsmen to boot.

"You shouldn't have come here, Evelyn," Gabe said with a little shake of his head. "I've always liked you, despite your many shortcomings. It will pain me to have to kill you again."

"My *shortcomings*?" He must have been talking to Sister Mary Martha. The question burst indignantly from my lips, but Gabe ignored it.

"Your choices...now, those are always little less lovable than you are yourself," Gabe mused. "Poor, dumb creature. You should have stayed with Adam. Your life would have been easier that way. Longer, too."

Gabe raised his hand to me, but Luke grabbed my arm and pulled me away before Gabe could let off the blast.

"The treaty stands, Gabriel. If you want to hurt her, you'll be breaking your end of it." Luke pulled me behind him, putting his body between Gabe's and my own. "And you'll have to go through me first."

"Gladly, Adversary," Gabe said with a shrug. "It wouldn't be the first time. You know I've never been one to believe your lies."

"He's not lying!" I blurted out. I was doing an awful lot of blurting right now. It felt strange, given that on a normal day I usually knew how to keep my mouth shut. But my heart was pounding, and adrenaline was still racing through my veins.

Gabe tilted his head to the side. "Is that so?"

"This...treaty," I said, thinking fast. "It's only broken if Luke took me to the Inferno against my will last night. Right?"

"As he did," Gabe said with certainty. "As he always does."

"No." I didn't know what Gabe meant, but I shook my head slowly. "I went with Luke willingly last night. He didn't kidnap me or capture me or steal me—or anything else." I took another step forward, around Luke's arm. "If someone broke your treaty, it wasn't Luke."

Gabe narrowed his dark, hooded eyes. "I thought you'd lost your memory, Evelyn."

"Yeah, well. I've gotten it back," I lied. Why was I lying? Hell if I knew. But so far, Luke had protected me—and Gabe had made it very clear that he wanted me dead.

If I wanted to live, I had to lie.

I didn't really have a choice.

“Gotten it back, have you?” Gabe’s brow lowered into a scowl.

“Yes,” I said as confidently as I could. “And everywhere I’ve been with Luke, I’ve gone willingly. He’s right—the treaty stands.”

“*Fuck.*” Gabe turned away, digging in his pockets for his phone. If Gabe was really an angel, I wondered if this was the first time one of God’s celestial beings had cursed.

“Well then.” Luke wrapped his arm around my shoulders and squeezed me close to him. “Now that that’s been sorted, why don’t you call off your minions?”

“Why should I?” Gabe asked, throwing his arms out wide. “Treaty broken or not...all it would take is one exceptional shot...”

Gabe raised his palm in my direction, but Luke only snorted.

“Don’t kid yourself, Gabriel,” Luke said. “Aim was never your strong suit.”

Gabe’s hand trembled for a moment—then, he lowered it.

“This isn’t the end of this, Adversary,” he spat—then, literally, he spat at Luke’s feet.

Luke stared at the dollop of shimmering saliva on the pavement for a moment, then shrugged.

“Looks like it is.”

Gabe snapped, and suddenly the battle was over. He vanished in a flash of light, along with every assailant attacking Legion and The Fourth.

One moment, they were there.

The next, they were all gone.

The tourists and civilians that had been milling around the scene of the battle, completely unaware of what was transpiring all around them, at least stopped and blinked as the light flared up and dissipated.

A few of them looked confused. Most, though, just continued on their ways.

“Damned solar flares,” an elderly man in a visor and a fanny pack muttered to his wife as they walked past, arm in arm. “Next thing you know, the apocalypse will start right here in these streets.”

Given what I’d just seen...I wondered if maybe he was right.

“Evie.” Luke took my shoulders in his hands and turned me toward him. “Are you all right?”

“A little shaken, but...” I felt my lips tremble as I stared up at him. Luke ran his hands down my arms, pausing at every scrape and scratch I’d

built up while rolling around on the floor of the limo among the broken glass.

“You’re hurt, love.”

I shook my head. “I’m fine. But, Luke...”

“We should get you somewhere safe.” Luke cut me off and tried to guide me away from Paradise. “It’s only a matter of time before Gabriel changes his mind.”

“Luke, I...my hands, I...”

I held my hands out in front of me. Now that the battle was over, I finally had the chance to marvel at what I’d watched them do to those doves back in the limo.

“We’re still on Heaven’s turf, Evie. We shouldn’t linger. We need to—”

“Luke, I shot *fire* from my hands—I killed so many doves, and they all had *teeth* and—”

“You generated fire?” Luke finally paused and stopped cutting me off as he took my hands in his. “You...you’re sure?”

“I’m sure,” I told him. “I don’t know how...but yes, I’m sure.”

“Evie, that’s...” He tugged me to him and moved his lips down toward mine—quickly, like he couldn’t help himself.

Like he didn’t even think about it.

I closed my eyes and was still waiting for his kiss for several long moments before I finally realized that Luke had stopped short.

“Sorry, love.” When I opened my eyes, Luke was frozen mere inches away from my lips. “I know I’ve stolen far too many kisses from you already. It’s just...*fire*, Evie.” He raised my palms to his lips instead and kissed them. First one, then the other. “You made fire.”

His lips burned even hotter than the flames had.

“I don’t know how, but...” I gulped.

I had one idea of how.

But admitting it meant that everything Luke had told me was true. All of it.

And I didn’t know if I was sure that I was ready to come to terms with any of that just yet.

“You remembered, Evie.” Luke’s eyes searched mine in disbelief. “What you did just then was very, very stupid. But you remembered. You made fire—and you remembered becoming my wife.”

“I...” I pulled my hands away from his and hugged myself tight. “No. I didn’t remember.”

“But you said—”

“I lied, Luke.” I looked away from him, down at the dark smears of chewed gum that stained the sidewalk. “You’re not the only one who can do that, you know.”

“Evie...”

Luke took my face in his hands with a newfound energy. Again, his lips moved toward mine—and again, for a moment, I was almost certain he was going to kiss me.

Instead, he just smirked.

“You lied,” he breathed. “You lied. To an angel. For me.”

“I lied for me, Luke.” I tried to pull away from him, but his gaze was locked on mine and I couldn’t quite bring myself to look away. “He would have killed me otherwise. What choice did I have?”

“That’s my girl.” Luke finally did move in to kiss me—not on my lips, though. On my left cheek, then my right.

“Luke...”

“Yes, love?”

“Everything that happened last night. In Paradise.” I glanced at the club over Luke’s shoulder. “Can you still show me? I’m still processing everything that just happened and...and now, more than ever, I think I need to know the truth. Plus, we’re already here.”

“Mm.” Luke pursed his lips then nodded. “Of course, gorgeous girl. Seeing is believing—and you’ve earned it.”

“Thank you,” I whispered. “So how do I—”

“Just close your eyes, love,” Luke purred down at me as he moved his lips to my forehead. “Close your eyes and you’ll see the truth for yourself.”

EVIE**Somewhere In A Memory...**

The neon lights of Paradise glowed against the darkness. Men in suits and women in short dresses were drawn to it from the street, moths to flames.

I stood at Luke's side as he helped each of the girls out of his limo. Charon held the door open for them as they climbed out.

"Thank you for this," I told Luke quietly. I wasn't sure that grateful was exactly what I was feeling now, but Luke had gone out of his way to help me. I might've been born in Jersey, but I wasn't born in a barn. "You didn't have to, you know."

"It was no problem at all," Luke said back, just as quietly. It felt like our words were secret somehow, even though they didn't need to be. Only meant for each other's ears. "The least I could do—"

"Unless?" I sensed an unless coming on—and I was right, too.

"Unless you'd like me to come in with you," Luke offered. He inclined his head slightly, directing his voice at my ear. "If your man's stepping out on you in there, perhaps a lesson should be taught."

"If he needs a lesson, I'll teach it to him myself." I looked to the girls who were clustered a few feet away from Luke and me. They were

watching us with wicked interest, even though our conversation was too quiet to reach their ears. "Thank you again though. I think we'll be parting ways here."

"You know what they say about parting, don't you?"

"That it's *such sweet sorrow*?"

"*The pain of parting is nothing to the joy of meeting again*," Luke countered. He reached into his jacket and pulled out his card, holding it out to me. "Dickens."

"I know who said it." I shook my head and pushed the card away. Luke's arrival into my life had brought the likely destruction of my engagement along with it. Handsome as he was, I didn't think I needed to find out what might be destroyed next. "I don't think we should meet again, Mr. Dawnstar. Keep your card."

"Take it," Luke insisted. "Burn it if you need me."

Reluctantly, I reached for it. "Don't you think calling would be easier?"

"Burn it," Luke repeated. "It's all the call I'll need."

I didn't see how that was even possible. It was a simple business card with his name written on the front and nothing on the back.

Luke Dawnstar. Adversary Industries, CEO.

It hardly came with a smoke detector attached.

"Thanks," I said, a little more uncertainly this time.

Luke took my hand, raised it to his lips, and kissed it.

It was the kind of kiss that lingered for just a second too long.

"Anything for you."

Luke climbed back into the limo. His driver closed the door behind him, then slipped behind the wheel.

As the limo pulled away, the girls approached me, all smiling in disbelief.

"Who is he?" Ava asked with a laugh as she watched the rear lights of the limo disappear.

"Luke Dawnstar, CEO of Adversary Industries." I flashed the card at her. "Apparently. Either that, or he's made up fake business cards and a fake position at a fake company to go along with his fake name."

"He's a man with a lot of nerve." Bea's eyes glittered like that was a good thing. "I like him."

“And he’s certainly taken with you, Eves.” Joan slung an arm around my shoulder and walked me toward the front doors of Paradise. “You should call him when we’re done with this. You’ll need a rebound.”

“A rebound. Right.” I bit my lip and sighed. “There’s no chance that this is just all one big misunderstanding, is there?”

I glanced to Bea, then Ava, then to Joan. One by one, they all slowly shook their heads.

“We know why you want it to be one,” said Bea.

“We can still turn back and write this off,” Ava added. “If you want. We don’t ever have to talk about it again.”

“No,” I said. As much as I wanted to take Ava up on that offer...I knew I couldn’t. “I need to know. Whatever happens after... I’m just glad I have you three here with me.”

“Where else would we be?” Joan pointed at two men standing outside the doors of the club. Smoke billowed around them, rising up in thin ribbons off the glowing ends of their cigarettes. “We’ll talk to Mal first, then work from there.”

Mal was even taller than Luke. He had broad shoulders and wore a white button-down with the sleeves rolled up to his elbows, no jacket, no tie. His auburn hair was messy in a windswept kind of way. Since he lived in LA, it should have read as surfer-chic, but it didn’t. For some reason, Mal had always reminded me a little of a cowboy—the high-noon, John Wayne, cattle rustlin’ type.

Ava hung back and blushed a little as we approached. If we’d been here for any other purpose, I would have made sure to tease her about it later.

She’d always been a little sweet on Mal. Ever since Adam had introduced them last year, actually. But where she was completely confident around every other man I’d ever seen her with, around Mal she always went a little quiet, even though I could tell she was desperate to talk to him.

“Ladies.” Mal’s Southern drawl was rough and deep. He stubbed out his cigarette and deposited it in the standing ashtray as we approached. “I’d say you’re a sight for sore eyes, but... I’m not sure that you should have come here tonight.”

“And miss out on a chance to see Ava blush herself silly?” Joan smirked. “Not a chance.”

“Joan!” Ava hissed, elbowing Joan in the side.

“Hello, Ava.” Mal smiled down at her kindly, ignoring Joan’s remark.

“Hi, Mal,” Ava mumbled. “You look good tonight.”

“As do you, darlin’.”

Joan snorted. “Mal, unless you want her face to catch fire—”

“Have you met my friend yet, Joan?” Mal cut Joan off and grabbed the shoulder of his companion.

The man was around the same height as Luke with bronze hair laced with streaks of red. He wore a leather bomber jacket with a wool collar and faded jeans.

As he turned, I noticed his t-shirt first. Bad Religion, the one with a nun in scandalous garter belts smoking a cigarette on it. He had a thick beard with even more red in it than his hair had.

“Hullo, lass.” His voice was a grumbling Scottish brogue. He tucked his cigarette, still lit, behind his ear and struck his hand out in Joan’s direction. “I’m Lachlan. Lock, if ye like.”

“I’m—ah...” As Joan took Lock’s hand, she looked at me in a panic—like she’d just forgotten her own name. “Joan. I’m Joan.”

“This is Beatrice, Ava...and I’ve already told you about Evie.” Mal finished the introductions as Lock and Joan continued to hold hands without shaking. Lock was gazing down at Joan intensely. Joan looked stunned. “They’re here about the, ah...*mischief* inside.”

“Ooch.” Lock finally let go of Joan’s hand and placed it on top of my head instead. He gave me two pats as he clucked his tongue. “Wouldna fancy bein’ you right now, then.”

“How bad is it?” I was getting a little tired of all the sympathy being laden on me, but I might as well know how deserved it was.

“You’re a sweet gal, Evie. That’s why earlier, when Ava asked...” Mal shook his head. “Do you want the truth or a lie?”

I bit my lip.

I didn’t want either.

“I’ll just see for myself,” I told him.

“Through the hall past the dance floor when you get inside, then.” Mal pulled the door open for me. “There’s a door at the end of it. You’ll find your man there.”

“And when ye do...” Lock raised a single finger and leveled it in front of my nose. He stooped down so we were at eye level. His greens glinted, dark and fierce. “You give him Hell.”

Bea grabbed Joan and Ava by the elbows, dragging them away from the men, and we headed inside.

Paradise was dark around the edges, but the sheer number of neon lights inside gave the rest of the club an ethereal glow.

Behind the bar, a handsome man with shoulder-length brown hair and kind eyes passed his hand over a glass of water. As he slid it across the bar to the woman who had ordered it, the liquid darkened to the deep burgundy of wine.

On top of the bar, a shirtless woman wearing angel wings poured vodka into the mouth of the man lying between her thighs. Whatever special effects magic had attached them between her shoulder blades must've been exactly that—magic. I couldn't tell how they'd been affixed to her skin, or how she made them flap so realistically as she poured.

On the stage in the center of the dance floor, a gorgeous man wearing only a pair of blue jeans and a similar set of wings slid across the floor on his knees, doing his best *Magic Mike* impression to the cheers of the crowd. When he leapt back up, his wings flapped too—and suddenly, for just a few seconds too long, he was airborne.

"This place is *good*," Bea whispered as we headed past the stage. "How do you think he did that?"

"Air vent beneath the stage, maybe?" Joan shook her head as she tore her eyes away from the dancer. "I don't know, and I don't think I care."

"Let's find Adam," Ava said. "There's a weird energy in here. I don't know that I like it."

"Agreed." I craned my neck to look over the crowd dancing around the stage. My eyes landed on the hallway that Mal had mentioned. "We need to head that way. Let's get in, get out, get this over with."

We grabbed each other's hands and daisy-chained our way through the crowd. Joan held Bea's hand, Bea held mine, and I held Ava's, just like we always did when we were in a packed club like this. It was far too easy to get separated otherwise.

But before we could reach the mouth of the hall, two tall, broad bodies stepped in front of us, blocking our way.

"Evelyn. Ladies." Mike, Adam's boss, held up a hand to stop us from trying to pass him. His golden hair was slicked back, and his brows were furrowed like my mere presence here was pissing him off. He studied me with his bright blue eyes for a long moment. "What are you doing here?"

“You’re supposed to be at your bachelorette party.” Gabe, a VP at Adam’s accounting firm, crossed his arms over his chest and glowered at us with dark, hooded eyes. “If you were going to show up here, you should have called us first.”

“I want to talk to Adam. He’s drunk and not answering my texts.” I drew myself up to my full height—still significantly shorter than either of theirs, unfortunately. “And I want to talk to him *now*.”

“That’s not possible, Evelyn. You’re being very rude.” Mike shook his head slowly. “Adam is here to enjoy himself. You ought to be doing the same.”

“Somewhere else.” Gabe reached into his jacket and pulled out four tickets, then held them out to me. “Why don’t you girls go down to Hunk Mansion instead? It’s your last night as a free woman, Evelyn. You should make the most of it.”

“And you just had those waiting in your jacket, did you?” I scoffed as I stared down at the tickets. “Are those really for us, or is that just where you were planning on heading next?”

“Consider them an early wedding present,” Michael suggested. “Although, now that I can smell your breath...” He bent down and sniffed me, like some kind of hunting dog assessing his prey. “Maybe you should go back to the Bellagio and sober up instead. You’re belligerent. I don’t think you want Adam to see you like this.”

“I’m not drunk,” I told him. It took more than a dirty martini and a sip of champagne to get me shitfaced the way Mike was implying. “And I’m not leaving.”

“None of us are,” Joan added. “Now, *move*.”

I turned my shoulder to push between them. But before I could get anywhere, Mike grabbed my shoulder and squeezed it threateningly.

His grip was tight. Aggressive. When he squeezed even harder, I grunted with pain.

The sense that I was in danger suddenly washed over me. *Real* danger. It felt like I’d just pried open the jaws of a wolf.

“Bad move, buddy.” Joan must have sensed the same thing I had. Her hand darted into her purse. When she pulled it back out again, she had her can of pepper spray with her.

Joan might’ve been doing her master’s in political science now, but the roots of her women’s studies degree ran deep. When she sprayed Mike in

the eyes with the can, she didn't even hesitate.

His grip on my shoulder released immediately. He stumbled back, hissing and rubbing at his eyes.

Gabe dove for me as I took advantage of the moment. Ava and I rushed past Michael, and Gabe tried to grab my wrist—but Bea snapped into action too.

“Run!” she shouted as she brought her knee up right between Gabe’s thighs. I heard all of the air huff from his lungs from the blow.

Ava and I didn’t waste any time after that. We broke into a sprint.

As we did, a burst of light shot past us. It was so bright, it hurt my eyes. The place where it hit the wall on our left smoked and singed.

“What was that?” Ava breathed.

“I don’t know—and I don’t think we should stick around to find out.”

Suddenly, the wings and the floating we’d seen earlier didn’t feel so much like stage tricks anymore.

I was beginning to feel like we’d stumbled onto something that we weren’t ever supposed to know about.

Something big.

Earth-shattering, even.

But there was no time to worry about the way the rules of reality seemed to be falling apart all around us.

Behind us, I could hear the sounds of a bar fight breaking out. I could smell fire. When I glanced over my shoulder, I saw smoke too.

“Go on through.” Ava let go of my hand and reached into her own purse as we reached the door at the end of the hall. She pulled a pocket knife out of her bag and flicked it open. “I’ll watch the door.”

I stared at the knife’s blade. It looked sharp enough to leave a mark.

Ava? With a knife?

What the hell was the world coming to?

Under any other circumstances, I would have laughed.

“Where did you get that thing?” I blinked a couple of times, just to make sure I wasn’t hallucinating. “I thought you were a pacifist.”

“Birthday present from Joan,” Ava explained. “I thought it was silly when she gave it to me, but...”

“Right. Not so much anymore.” I threw my arms around Ava’s neck and hugged her tight. “Thank you, Aves.”

“No problem, Eves.” She gave me a smile when I pulled away. “What else are bridesmaids for?”

I could think of a few things, none of which involved pepper spray or knife fights, but I wasn’t about to argue.

Tonight, this was *exactly* what bridesmaids were for.

I took a deep breath and pushed through the door.

Once I saw what was happening behind it, all of this would be over.

As soon as I stepped into the room, my eyes locked on Adam.

Just like that, I was sure...the wedding was off.

He was naked. That was the first of the many, many fucked-up things happening before me.

Around him, other nude bodies writhed in ecstasy. Some men, some women. Some so androgynous I couldn’t tell what gender they were. They were all beautiful, and they were all moaning with pleasure. Writhing together, as if their bodies were all one.

Adam’s eyes were closed when I stepped into the room. His nose was covered in a white powder—the cocaine Ava had mentioned when she’d called Mal earlier, no doubt. His mouth was open, gasping as the others kissed up and down his chest—and lower, too.

I stood there for several long seconds, desperate to look away and too stunned to be able to.

My fiancé, love of my life and husband-to-be, was in the middle of an orgy.

I was pretty sure that vision was going to be etched in my mind for the rest of my life—whether I wanted it to be or not.

It was only when Adam’s eyes flicked open that I felt like I could tear myself away.

Our gazes met for just a moment. His, slowly filling with shame and shock and fear. Mine, empty and emotionless. Stunned.

I turned away as fast as I could—before the tears started to fall.

Whatever happened next, I only knew one thing for certain.

I wasn’t going to let that bastard see me cry.

My heart turned to glass as I wheeled around and pushed back out into the hall. It felt like a fist was wrapped around it, cracking it into stardust inside my ribs.

“Eves?” Ava grabbed my shoulders and tried to meet my gaze with hers. “Are you okay?”

“It was never going to work out,” I mumbled, stumbling back down the hall.

“Eves, what happened?”

“My parents never liked him.” I grabbed her hand off my shoulder and twined my fingers between hers. “None of you did either.”

“Eves—”

“Everyone tried to warn me that something was off about him.” And I’d been too stupid to see it. Even when I’d felt it myself, I’d made excuses for him and shoved that feeling right back down to the pit of my stomach. “I turned a blind eye to every red flag I saw. Even when they were waving right in front of my face.”

“That bad?”

I shrugged. “The wedding’s off.”

We were near the entrance of the hallway again now. Just beyond it, I could see shapes and shadows shifting violently beneath the neon lights. Something hard cracked violently against soft flesh on the dance floor. A man groaned in pain and a woman let out a scream.

As soon as we stepped back out of the hall, a pair of hands took Ava by the shoulders.

“You two okay?” Mal asked. Smoke rolled off of him—something more than just his cigarettes. It was like he was burning here inside the club, just beneath his skin. “We heard a blast and came in to make sure everything was all right, but—”

“We could ask you the same thing.” I raised my hand to his cheek, curious, but he brushed me away before I could touch him. “What’s happening to your skin, Mal?”

“It’s nothin’. I’m fine. But we need to get out of here.” Mal looked over his shoulder to Lock. “Shoot-out’s over! Time to go!”

Lock grabbed the hair of the man he was fighting—the winged stripper who had been dancing up on the stage when we came in. He slammed the man’s face against the wall, then held out an arm to sweep Bea and Joan out of the fray.

“Ye can fight more later,” Lock promised them. Smoke was rolling off of his skin too, and his t-shirt was stained with something wet that seemed to almost shine. “Away with ye. Now.”

“Not without you,” Joan insisted.

Lock furrowed his brow like he was trying to decide, based on what he knew of Joan, whether it was worth arguing with her or not.

Apparently, Joan had made a quite the impression on him in the short time they'd known each other.

"Aye, fine. I'll come with ye, then." Lock glanced back at the rest of the fighting like he'd been kicked out of the bed of a treasured lover. "Just seems a shame to leave such a beauty of a fight."

"One that *you* started," Mal grumbled. "I thought I told ya to contain yourself, Lock. How many heads did you bust in there? A dozen? More?"

"More, surely." Lock waved Mal's comment away. "Ye ken well that controlling myself isnae my strong suit, lad."

I looked around for an exit. The door we'd come in through was blocked by the brawl, and I didn't see another clearly marked—but I knew there must have been one somewhere.

"Over here!"

The voice that called out to us echoed strangely, like it had been whispered in our ears instead of shouted over the cacophony of the brawl.

Through the crowd, I caught sight of the bartender standing near an open door. Beyond it, I could see the outside.

We rushed to the door and the bartender waved us through it. Behind us, Mal and Lock all but pushed us out into the night once more.

"Thank you," I said to the bartender, turning before we made our getaway.

"No thanks needed. Just...go in peace." The bartender gave me a gentle smile and a nod. There were no wings on his back, but the warmth and care in his eyes made him seem more angelic than a halo ever could. "And maybe don't come back."

"Not planning on it," I assured him.

He closed the door behind us quickly. Mal and Lock fanned out beyond the girls and me, glancing around looking for an escape route.

"We're sittin' ducks out here. We need to head off, and quick," Mal said with a grimace. "This whole area's gonna be crawling with more angels than we can shake a stick at before long."

"How did the four of ye get here?" Lock asked.

"By limo." I bent over and considered throwing up for a moment, but my stomach felt too empty for that. My lungs ached as I took in a couple

of deep breaths and blew them out slowly. “A man drove us here in one. Luke Dawnstar.”

Mal and Lock went quiet. When I glanced up at them, they were exchanging a look that was almost...knowing.

“Did he give ye a way to contact him, lass?” Lock asked.

“Um.” I reached into my purse and pulled out Luke’s card. “Yes...but I don’t see how it could possibly work.”

“Give it a try,” Mal urged.

“And quick-like,” Lock agreed.

“It’s kind of a long shot, but...” I held my hand out to Mal. “I’ll need your lighter.”

Mal didn’t question why. He just reached into his jacket, pulled out a golden flip-top lighter, and placed it in my waiting palm.

I flicked my thumb against the wheel, summoning up the flame. Then, glancing to the girls just so they knew that *I* knew what I was about to do was as insane as it looked...

I set the business card alight. When the flames neared my fingers, I dropped it to the ground. The paper curled and turned to ash quickly.

A second later, near the road I saw a set of headlights appear.

Luke’s limo pulled up out in front of the club. He flung the door open and sprung out. As he waved us to him, there was an urgency to his movements like he knew exactly what dire straits we’d somehow managed to end up in.

Mal and Lock helped the girls into the limo first, but I hesitated outside of it. Just for a moment.

“That was fast.” I stared up at Luke, entirely confused. “How the hell—”

“I was waiting for you, love.” Luke smiled down at me. The sound of his voice soothed the pain in my chest in an instant, though I had no idea why. “Truth be told, I never really left.”

EVIE

When my eyes opened again, I was crying. The tears burned, not just in my eyes, but all the way through my sinuses too.

“Shh. You’re all right. I’ve got you.” Luke wrapped his arms around me without asking for permission.

For once, I actually welcomed it.

I was very much in need of a hug.

“I’m sorry,” I found myself saying. My voice was tense and muddy, just short of blubbering. Embarrassing. “I don’t mean to—”

“It’s okay to cry, Evie. Normal, even.” Luke pressed his lips to the top of my head and held me tighter. “You’ve remembered a very sad thing. You’re allowed to cry about it. No shame in tears.”

“I’m not crying because of him.” I couldn’t even say Adam’s name. Not after what I’d remembered. After what he’d done.

“No?” Luke pulled back and smoothed a thumb over my cheek, wiping the tears away. “Then what is it?”

“Because I was so *stupid*.” The word came out like a roar. “I trusted him. God—I was going to *marry* him today!”

“Trust is a beautiful thing, Evie.” Luke pulled me against him once more. The spice of his cologne was strangely comforting. Like walking into a house where you knew you were really, finally safe. “It says more about the bastard for breaking it than it does about you for giving it to him in the first place.”

“I think I could use that drink now.” I pressed my cheek to Luke’s chest and rested it there for a moment, breathing him in until I’d calmed back down. “But...probably not here.”

“And you’ll have it. Anything you like, anywhere you want.”

A grunt sounded at our side as a dark shadow passed over us, eclipsing the sun itself. I looked up to see The Fourth, Luke’s motorcycle buddy, holding out his fist to us. Luke held out his hand in return. Metal clinked against Luke’s palm as The Fourth dropped something into it—keys.

“That’s very kind of you, my friend.” Luke gave The Fourth a tight smile. “Your bike... Are you sure?”

The Fourth nodded, and Luke clapped him on the shoulder.

“Thank you,” Luke said. “I owe you one.”

Behind The Fourth, Leigh waved to us. There was only one Leigh now, even though just a few moments ago, there’d been dozens.

“We’ll clean up here,” Leigh called to us. “You kids go somewhere safe.”

Luke wrapped his arm around me as The Fourth guided us to his bike. It was all black, even the parts that should have been chrome. Luke straddled it, then offered me his hand to help me on the back.

“No helmets?” I sniffed and wiped the last tears from my eyes. I might have been dumb enough to trust Adam, but I wasn’t so stupid I was about to climb on The Fourth’s deathtrap of a motorcycle without some protection first. “I don’t think so.”

A heavy hand fell on my shoulder. I turned to see The Fourth staring down at me through that impenetrable black visor of his. His touch was rough, but not unkind.

It felt like that of a very strong man doing his best to be gentle—to hold himself back.

He removed his hand from my shoulder to pull his helmet from his head. I blinked as I saw his face for the first time.

I didn’t know why, but I’d been imagining something truly monstrous beneath that helmet.

Instead, I found a pair of kind silver eyes, a handsomely crooked nose, firm lips and a mess of black waves.

He didn’t speak as he put the helmet on my head. As soon as it was settled, he turned and left before I could even thank him for it.

“The Fourth likes you.” Luke sounded impressed.

“He was just being nice.” My voice sounded muffled from beneath the visor. The scent around me was cold and dark, but not unpleasant. It reminded me of a starless night.

“He doesn’t take his helmet off for just anyone.” Luke pulled me onto the motorcycle behind him. “But never mind that now. Just hold onto me tight and we’ll get you that drink.”

A few hours ago, I would have argued. But after the day I’d had...

I felt safe around Luke—and he’d given me no reason not to trust him. Even when I’d been looking for one.

He’d kept me safe up to this point.

After the battle we’d just been through, I couldn’t even pretend that he’d lied to me anymore.

I had no reason to believe he’d fail me now.

I wrapped my arms around Luke’s waist like he’d asked. It was nice to have something to hold onto, actually.

It made it easier to hide the way my hands were shaking now that the full memory of Adam’s betrayal had finally been brought to light.

THE BIKE WAS huge and loud, but Luke drove carefully. Even when we were going faster than I would’ve liked, the bike passed through traffic like a hot knife through warm butter.

I felt dazed as Luke pulled me off the bike. He lifted The Fourth’s helmet off my head and hung it on the bike’s handle, then smoothed my hair down.

“Thank you,” I whispered. Luke’s touch was so gentle, so kind—and I needed kindness right now.

“You’ve got lovely hair, Evie.” Luke took the length of it in his fist and twisted it around his hand a few times before letting it fall back down to my waist. “Can’t have The Fourth’s helmet ruining the way it lays.”

Luke kept his hand on the small of my back and led me through Limbo to the Inferno’s elevator. When Phlegyas pushed the button to take us up—down—whatever direction it was—I didn’t even feel my stomach churn as the world turned around me this time.

“Where are you taking me now?” I asked it more out of curiosity than anything. I felt...empty. Lost at sea. And Luke was the glow from the lighthouse on the shore, steering me away from the jagged rocks of a dozen different cliff sides. “Wrath? Fraud? Heresy?”

“Maybe later. You’ll like Heresy especially. Exactly your kind of place.” Luke brushed his hand down my skirt. “Right now, you need some relaxation—and to get out of these clothes, I think.”

I blinked, then looked down at my dress. It was ripped and snagged in places from the shattered glass of the limo’s windows. My knees were bruised, and my stockings were torn. Even my Louboutins felt a little wobbly, like the heels could crack off of them at any minute.

When I glanced at Luke, I noticed that the sleeve of his jacket was ripped, and his shirt underneath too. Through the tear, I saw a shallow gash in his arm, still smeared with that glittering substance too dark to be blood.

“You’re hurt,” I said softly as I reached out to touch him. He didn’t stop me at first, but before I could touch his skin, he pulled my hand away. “Are you sure we shouldn’t get you to a hospital instead?”

“It’s nothing so bad. Just a little nick.” Luke laughed and brought my fingers to his lips so he could kiss them. “Blessed iron in the hands of angels. Gets me every time.”

I let the subject drop at that. *Blessed iron*...after everything else I’d seen today, and everything I remembered from last night on top of it, I knew sooner or later I was going to have to finally admit that Luke’s Heaven and Hell act wasn’t really an act at all.

The fire in Luke’s hands had been real fire.

The angel wings in that club last night—those hadn’t been prosthetics.

I didn’t want to admit it. I’d been fighting for two fucking days now.

Life would be easier if this was all smoke and mirrors—but how could I rationalize the way the bodies of those doves had opened up into gaping maws full of sharp teeth earlier?

How could I deny the fire I’d felt burning in the palms of my own hands?

Nothing else made sense at this point.

Either I’d woken up insane two mornings ago, or it was real. All of it.

Just like Luke had been saying all day.

The relaxing scent of lavender and sea salt greeted us as we stepped out of the elevator. I couldn’t help myself—I closed my eyes and stood still as I breathed it in.

“It smells like the ocean.” My shoulders eased back as I breathed out again. “Like calm. A peaceful sleep.”

“You’ve always loved the sea.” Luke guided me across the ivory tile of the floor toward the front desk of what looked like some kind of spa. The expensive kind. “In this life and every other. Remind me to take you to Jordan once it’s safe for us to travel.”

“And when will that be?” I paused and pursed my lips. “I mean, if I decided I wanted to go with you.”

“Eventually. When we do, though, you’ll love it. The water in the Dead Sea is so salty, you’ll be able to lie back, close your eyes and float for as long as you like.”

“That...does sound nice.” We reached the counter, where two spa attendants were waiting for us—one male, one female.

“Your Majesty.” The female attendant curtsied deeply behind the desk.

“Welcome to Vexations,” the male said to me as he rose from his bow. “How may we assist you today? A massage? Facials?”

“Just the hot springs,” Luke told him. “If anyone’s to be rubbing my bride down—or giving her a facial, for that matter—it will be me.”

“You can’t have hot springs on the fifth floor of a building.” I ignored Luke’s other words the same way I ignored how my pussy throbbed when he said them. “That’s...impossible.”

“Yes,” Luke agreed as the attendants led us through a softly lit hallway with rough, stone walls. “You have seen much of the impossible today, I think. A fifth-floor hot springs likely being the least of it.”

We entered the hot springs through a stone archway with torches on either side of it. There were more torches within, mounted on the rocky walls. The humidity was heavy as we moved into the cavern. There was an abrupt shift from the pleasant coolness of the hall outside to the luscious warmth within.

The floor beneath my sneakers was tiled with a beautiful white marble swirled with gold. In the center of the room was a huge pool with crystal-clear waters. Smaller pools surrounded it, further into the cavern.

Mists hung thickly throughout the entire cavern, floating just over the surface of the water and veiling our bodies.

It looked like something from a dream.

Maybe it was.

Maybe *all* of this was.

“You may leave us,” Luke told the attendants lingering by the entrance. “I’ll undress my wife myself, thank you.”

“You’ll *what*?” I blinked at Luke as the attendants left us. “I asked for a drink, not to be stripped down.”

“You can’t swim in your clothes, love. There will be drinks once we’re in the water, and soft robes to wear for when we’re done.”

“I...” My mouth gaped open. I was still trying to process everything I’d seen at Paradise. I wasn’t sure that I could manage having Luke’s hands on my body again on top of it. “I can undress myself, thank you.”

“Suit yourself, love.” Luke shrugged off his jacket and began unbuttoning his shirt. He let them both fall to the floor before his hands moved to his belt.

All the while, Luke stared at me. At my body. It was a devouring look, the same kind that one might give a glorious feast after starving in the desert for forty days and forty nights.

I might as well have already been naked, with him looking at me like that.

“Are you?” Luke asked.

“Am I what?”

“Planning on swimming in your clothes.”

I hugged my arms around my ribs. “I’m already feeling pretty vulnerable right now, Luke. Being naked on top of it...I’m not sure I can handle that.”

“You shouldn’t be so embarrassed of your own body, Evie.” Luke kicked his shoes off, then stepped out of his pants and boxers alike. He moved to the edge of the pool and looked over his shoulder at me. “You’ve got a lovely figure. You ought to be proud to show it off.”

Now, I was the one staring.

With an ass like Luke’s, round and firm and perfectly shaped, it was hard to do anything but stare.

“I don’t even wear bikinis in public.” I blushed and tore my gaze away—but as Luke eased himself down into the pool, I let myself look at him a little longer before he disappeared into the water.

He was gorgeous. Unfairly gorgeous.

He put Adam to shame just by waking up in the morning.

And still... Luke was somehow mine.

I stood several feet away from the edge of the pool as Luke swam backwards toward the center.

“Mm. That’s a pretty picture indeed.” Luke smiled at me as he waded. “You, topless on some beach in southern France...not even wearing a bikini.”

“I mean, I wear one-pieces, Luke. With a cover-up too, if I can help it.” I tried to pull my skirt down to conceal more of my body, but I only succeeded in ripping it further.

Now, the fabric sagged awkwardly over my thighs. From the angle Luke was at, he could probably even see my panties.

Christ.

“Now there’s an idea.” Luke purred. He swam back to the edge of the pool. “Bring me my trousers, love.”

I might have hesitated, but my body knew an order when I was given one.

And coming from Luke’s lips, I couldn’t deny him.

I picked up his slacks and carried them to the edge of the pool.

“Thank you, Evie.” Luke turned the slacks around in his hands until he found something hanging from his belt. The same dagger he’d nearly chopped all my hair off with yesterday in a soft leather sheath. “Now. Sit here on the edge, with your feet in the water.”

“Luke...” I breathed—but my body was already moving as he had commanded.

“Now, love. You’re far too smart to be concerned with having a beach body. Every ounce of fat on you is in your arse and your tits, anyway.” Luke took the torn part of my skirt in his hands and positioned his knife beneath it. He slashed through the fabric at its center. There was a dull hiss, then the fabric fell away. “What on Earth has made you so ashamed?”

“I’m not ashamed,” I insisted.

“No?” Luke positioned his knife between my legs next, beneath the untorn fabric of my dress. One edge rested dangerously against my pelvis, brushing against my panties, and I held my breath. “Then tell me—why are you so timid now, when you were so willing for me to undress you last night?”

“It’s not about fat,” I said. My voice was barely a whisper, and I didn’t want it to be. I cleared my throat and spoke a little louder. “Or my tits. Or my ass—which, fuck you for noticing.”

“Please do,” Luke encouraged as he slit the remaining fabric of my dress with his knife. The cut went all the way up to my belly button. “It’s a

very nice arse.”

“It’s...Adam.” Of all the things I didn’t want to admit right now, that was actually the least of it. “It wouldn’t matter if I weighed five hundred pounds or fifty, Luke. When we...made love—”

Luke winced as he put the knife aside. “I don’t know that I’d call it that.”

“He never looked nearly as happy with me as he did with all that cocaine on his nose in the midst of all those writhing bodies in that memory.”

Wow. That was...embarrassing to admit, to say the least.

I wasn’t sure if the fact that I was sitting in front of Luke with my cunt right at mouth level with my dress half cut off me made it better...or worse.

“Perhaps it was the cocaine,” Luke mused.

“Or maybe it was just...me. I was never enough for him.”

Luke took both sides of the slit in my dress in his hands. “I don’t see how that’s possible.”

“And when I’d ask him to do something interesting in bed...” I wanted to look away, but Luke’s eyes were locked on mine. I couldn’t break his gaze. “He acted like I was the depraved one.”

“You? Depraved?” Luke’s lips curled in amusement as he flexed his arms and ripped my dress all the way up to my ribcage. “Now *that* I’d like to see.”

“It was my fault he cheated, Luke,” I whispered. “The problem was me.”

And there it was. One of the many things I’d been trying to avoid saying. An entire failed relationship laid out before him like a fucking corpse.

The problem was *always* me.

Luke picked up his knife again. He studied the sheer lace insert between the dress’ labels for a moment, like he was looking for the perfect place to slide it in.

I held my breath again, waiting—for what?

For his knife to pierce my ribs instead, maybe. Somewhere, deep down, it felt like something already had.

Or maybe, for Luke to finally drop his gentleman scoundrel act to deliver the killing blow from his lips instead.

If he really was the Devil, and I really was in Hell...

Yes, he'd say, *this is all your fault*.

That would make all of this make sense.

I had died sometime after finding Adam in Paradise last night, and now, Luke's job was to spend the rest of eternity torturing me.

"You *are* a problem, Evie." Luke positioned the knife beneath the lace and just like that, my worst fears were confirmed.

A single tear fell from my eye and ran down my cheek. I nodded, just once.

I may have been in Hell with the Devil, but at least I knew how to accept my fate when it was dealt to me.

"You are a problem," Luke said again. He ripped the knife upward and the lace gave way beneath it. "For my eyes when I look at you, because you burn so brightly and yet, I cannot seem to look away."

Luke slipped the knife a little higher. I wanted to breathe, but the blade was pressed right against my skin.

"You are a problem for my mouth." Luke cut the lace again, pulling his lips back in a snarl that bared his perfectly white teeth. "For I am a sinner, and every moment that your name is on my tongue compels me to sing a hosanna. My lips burn for you every moment that they aren't on your perfect, silken skin—and they burn even worse when I give in, only to realize that I must pull them away."

"Luke..."

"You are a problem, Evie." Luke moved the knife more quickly now. He sounded furious—or like something even beyond fury. *Rage*. "For my heart, every time I see such goodness in you and yearn so deeply to destroy it." He slipped the knife beneath the strap between the cups of my bra and cut it away as well. "For my throat, which turns to ash and embers when you are away from me." Another slash from Luke's knife. Another tear in the lace. "For my hands—*dear God*, Evie, the things I want to do to you with my hands—and for my cock, which has been rock hard with so little blessed release every moment since you came back to me that I am reminded, yet again, exactly why I am damned."

"Luke!" I gasped as he placed the knife beneath the final bit of lace. There were only a few strings of it left. He would have merely needed the slightest movement of his knife against them to sever them completely—but instead, he tore the blade through them viciously.

The knife clattered against the tile as he tossed it aside. A pale fire burned in his eyes and his shoulders rose and fell, heavy with his breath.

The dress, the bra—all of it—slid from my arms and fell away.

“You are a problem for me, Evie.” Luke curled his fingers beneath my panties. These, he didn’t need the knife for. He just ripped them off of me with a low, angry growl. “I am damned for wanting you, damned for needing you—and even more damned for not taking you the way I should have—hard and rough up against that bar the moment I laid eyes on you.” He forced my thighs apart and hooked his arms beneath them. I slid forward as he pulled me to the very edge of the pool. “And anyone who watched us could have been damned as well.”

“Luke...” Oh, *God*. I could only say his name—and as I felt the heat of his breath against my cunt, I didn’t know if I was trying to tell him to stop or begging him to make good on those words.

“No, Evie.” Luke shook his head. “You know good and well that’s not my real name.”

“I...” I couldn’t form sentences anymore. I wasn’t sure I could even form thoughts, let alone syllables.

“Say it,” Luke growled up from between my thighs. “Say it, and I will give you everything you have ever desired and more.”

I swallowed. Hard. But my mouth was dry.

I bit my lip, deep enough that I could taste blood.

I breathed—had I even been breathing at all as Luke spoke? I couldn’t tell. Every breath was labored, like it was my first. Like I was still learning how lungs even worked.

Like it was my last.

“Lucifer.” The words fell from my lips like an angel pushed from Heaven, and Luke—

Luke smirked.

“Damn right I am,” he purred—and then, he got to work.

His mouth descended on my cunt. He forced his lips against me, nuzzling deep into my folds until he was covered in the slickness that had been pooling there the whole time he spoke. His tongue pressed into me, lapping at my entrance. Claiming it as his own.

He replaced it with his fingers as he flattened his tongue, licking all the way up my slit. Luke thrust his middle finger inside me all the way to

his knuckles. It brushed against my G-spot, sending a pang of neon-red light shooting up to my core.

As he found my spot again—more firmly this time—the light turned white-hot and burst through me, to the roots of my molars all the way down to the tips of my toes.

I cried out—only for that cry to die in my throat as my breath claimed it and Luke’s mouth found my clit. He sucked it between his lips greedily, and I gasped desperately. Breathlessly.

Luke’s growl was my only answer. He sucked my clit between his teeth and pinned it between them, then lashed out at it brutally with his tongue.

I didn’t know what to do at that point.

Moan, scream, or fall apart completely.

In the end, my body made the decision for me.

I did all three—and more.

“Mine.” Luke popped my clit out from between his lips and stared up at me like a conquered kingdom he was planning on burning down at his feet. “All fucking mine.”

His fingers dug into the flesh of my ass, possessive and unrelenting. The arm he still had hooked beneath my thigh flexed, and suddenly the world had fallen out from beneath me.

I splashed into the pool with Luke—right into his arms.

“Say it, Evie.” Luke dragged his lips across mine. They were still slick with my honey. The taste of me was still on his tongue—dark, rich and sweet. My lips burned when my honey touched the place where my teeth had broken my skin—and for him. I burned so, so much for him. “I want to hear it from those lovely, chaste lips of yours.”

I slid my tongue across my lips and slowly, I nodded.

“I’m yours,” I swore to him. “All fucking yours.”

“Yes, you are, love.” Luke swam forward, pinning me up against the side of the pool. “Yes, you fucking are.”

His lips crushed against mine. First, like he was claiming a long-sought conquest—then, like he was enjoying his prize. His tongue forced its way into my mouth. As I parted my lips for him, I met it with my own.

Luke had been right about that kiss in the limo earlier.

It had felt far, far too right—and this one felt even better.

This time, neither of us were holding anything back.

My thighs wrapped around Luke's waist. His cock found my folds in an instant. It was so stiff, the first time he thrust it against me, it slipped roughly all the way up my soaked, aching slit. The tip of his cock caught the sensitive bud of my clit and I cried out against his mouth.

Luke muffled that sound, and every other, with a flurry of hungry, ferocious kisses. No matter what he did, they never seemed to stop.

He groped at my breasts, hard enough to make me gasp for him. His fingers moved to my nipples, plucking them to peaks then pinching them mercilessly. Just like that, he turned those gasps to moans. Like magic.

Like sin.

When Luke finally pulled his lips away from mine, it was only so he could take his cock in his hand and position it firmly at my entrance.

"You are my wife, Evie. My possession. My world. My universe. My whore." His hips slammed against mine and my cunt stretched to accommodate him. He entered me, not in inches, but in miles. In eternities. "Just as I am yours."

"Oh, *God*," I gasped. My whole body convulsed as he sheathed the full length of his cock in me.

"No, love," he panted, shaking his head back and forth. "No God here. Only me."

Luke moved inside me, rough and fierce. His arm curled around my waist to keep the hard edge of the pool from scraping against my back as he lifted me up with every thrust. With his other hand, he dug his short, smooth nails into the skin over my shoulder blades.

I hissed—in pleasure? In pain—until I realized that my hands were already curled against Luke's own shoulders, doing the exact same thing to him.

"You know what I want from you, love." Every word he said, he snarled through his teeth. "I have waited so damned long for it—and I'm not waiting anymore."

"What?" I panted. My voice was high and breathy. Like a plea. Like a prayer. "What do you want? I'll give you—" Fuses were being lit throughout my body. Every single cell of me flared to light and life. "I'll give you anything you want, Luke."

"You know what I want." Sweat beaded Luke's brow. I could feel my own sweat dripping down my forehead onto my cheeks. "You know exactly what I fucking want."

“Luke—yes.” I would have promised him my soul at that point—but then again, I likely already had. “Anything. It’s yours.”

“No, Evie. Not anything.” He moved his mouth to my neck. His teeth scraped against the delicate skin there. A threat. A promise. “I want *everything*.”

“You have it.” I closed my eyes and tilted my head back. Inside me, fire sizzled and sparkled. My nails dug deeper into Luke’s skin and my legs tightened around his waist, squeezing him closer. Holding him in. “It’s yours. I’m yours.”

“Come for me, Evie.” Luke’s voice raised to a roar as his thrusts came even harder and faster still. “Fucking come!”

“Luke—”

In an instant, it happened.

Fireworks.

Tears fell down my cheeks, mingling with the sweat, as Luke sank his teeth into my neck. My pussy was convulsing around his cock, clenching and releasing so rapidly that soon, I couldn’t tell which was which.

I cried out, high and sharp and desperately. The sound echoed throughout the cavern around us, a single note amplified *ad infinitum*.

Then, Luke’s cock throbbed within me. His balls tightened—and suddenly, the sounds of my pleasure were no longer alone.

I’d never felt cum shooting into me before. I knew some women could feel it gushing up inside them and splashing into their wombs—but not me.

At least, not before that moment.

Not before Luke.

It burst out of his tip, so hot, my cunt burned even brighter for having it within me. It shot out in torrents, then in floods, then in bursts. He was so thick and filled me so completely, not a single drop leaked out.

I was full of it. Full of him.

Full of something else, so much greater than ourselves that there wasn’t even a word to describe it—and I knew three different languages.

For fuck’s sake, I’d majored in English.

We went breath for breath as the explosiveness of the moment softened, then stilled.

But even if the moment had softened, Luke himself certainly hadn’t. His cock still throbbed inside me, long after the orgasm was done. And

around it, my cunt still twitched, like it was milking him of every last drop of his seed. A Gloria. A credo.

A perfect call and response.

When our breaths finally slowed, Luke eased his grip on my shoulders. I released mine from his and smoothed my hands over his skin. I felt the scars from our wedding night, then the new ones I'd scratched against him—and finally, I stroked the twisted scars between his shoulder blades.

The place where he'd once had wings.

"It's all real, isn't it?" I rested my forehead against Luke's. My vision focused and unfocused as I tried to stare into his eyes.

"Yes, love." Luke turned his head and brushed his lips against mine. "It's all real, and I'm all yours, and you're all mine."

LUKE

She was delicate after she came. She always had been. It didn't matter if we were rutting on the battlefields of Cappadocia, fucking our way through the Blitz, or simply making love here in the Inferno's hot springs.

When she took my cock inside her, she gave me everything she had.

And when we were done, she was far too spent to be anything but supple, soft, and sweet.

"Come here, love." I shifted to sit on a bench cut from the rock of the pool's side and drew her onto my lap. The water was only high enough to lap at my ribs here. She would be able to sit with her head above water—to rest. "Sit on my knee and let me admire how lovely you are."

"You're sweet to me, Luke." Evie didn't fight me as I settled that lovely arse of hers on top of my thigh and wrapped her up in my arms. She curled her arms around my neck and rested her cheek against my chest in return. "Though sometimes I have no idea why."

"I could be less sweet." I gave her a gentle smack on the side of her arse. "Some might say you deserve to be punished for your little stunt back in front of Paradise, you know."

"My stunt?"

"You put yourself in harm's way, love. If that encounter with Gabe had gone any differently..."

“But it *didn't*.” Evie’s eyes narrowed quickly. “If you punish me, I’ll make you regret it.”

I laughed and patted the side of her arse again. “I’m sure you would. Luckily for you, I think you’ve been through enough already. You’ll just have to tolerate my sweetness. Is it really so unbearable?”

Evie didn’t answer. She simply rubbed her cheek against my chest and closed her eyes.

Either she had accepted what a ridiculous thing she had been to suggest that Adam’s transgressions were her fault, or she wasn’t quite yet ready for me to fuck some sense into her again.

We stayed there in the pool, just like that, for a long while. Evie’s body was supple and responsive, as liquid as the water around us. Wherever my hands wandered across her skin, she leaned into my touch.

Wherever my lips traveled—her hair, her cheek, her shoulder—she allowed it with a tiny moan of reply.

The spa attendants brought us our lunch there by the side of the pool. A picnic of grapes, roasted artichoke hearts, oysters and—Evie’s favorite—olives was laid out around us, along with fresh bread, butter, and a decanter of white wine.

I pressed an olive to her lips, then purred for her as she licked my fingers clean of its salt. When I poured a glass of wine for us to share, she sipped daintily from it, then went right back to resting drowsily against my chest.

“Are you falling asleep on me, Evie?”

“No,” she mumbled, trying to burrow even deeper into my embrace. “I’m just so warm and...and comfy.”

“Good.” I chuckled. It had been a long day already. I supposed she was entitled to a nap, but... “You surely have questions for me, though.”

“About what?” She pulled away and flicked her gaze up to meet mine. Her eyelids were heavy. Her lashes, thick and dark.

“Oh, darling.” My throat rumbled as I reached for a slice of bread and buttered it for her. “I’ve obviously worn you out far too much if you really have to ask.”

I fed her bits of buttered bread, soft and white. I tipped oysters over her lower lip and listened to her moan with pleasure as she swallowed them down. At first, she only stirred a little when each delicacy was

offered to her, but before long she was helping herself to the artichoke hearts and devouring olives ravenously.

“Mm. So you weren’t tired after all.” I smoothed her hair down against the back of her head. Her elbows rested on the edge of the pool. In one hand, her cheek rested. In the other, she held the glass of wine. “Just hungry.”

Evie sighed with contentment as she took another sip from her glass “I don’t know what you did to me, Luke—”

“Perhaps I should do it again, then.” I reached around her to caress her breast from behind. “If I had done my job properly, there wouldn’t be room for uncertainty.”

She turned her face toward me. Her eyes were narrowed but sparkling. “You’re bad.”

I brushed my lips against her neck. “So they tell me.”

“I meant that I’ve never felt this hungry before, Luke.” Evie laughed gently as she popped another grape into her mouth. “Although...what is it you’re always saying? *Maybe later?*”

“You catch on quick, love.”

“Not quickly enough, though.” She sighed as she eased out of my grasp and turned to face me. “Now that I’m fed...you’re right, I do have questions.”

“As you should.” I took the glass from her fingers and sipped from it myself. The wine was pleasantly cool compared to the heat of the springs. “And as you always do.”

Free of the wine glass, Evie rolled her shoulders back and waded out into the pool. She swam beautifully, even when she wasn’t trying at it.

“It was like you were born for the water.” I turned and stretched my arms across the edge of the pool as I watched her. “I knew it the moment I saw you swimming around like that during the Great Flood.”

Evie laughed. “You mean the Noah’s Ark flood?”

“The very same.”

“That was real, then?” She turned to me, treading water.

“Very real,” I assured her. “You could go so far as to say that you and I were the very cause of it.”

“Of course we were.” Evie twirled in the water again so she was facing away from me. She shifted to float on her back and her eyes glimmered at

me, upside down but still so, so beautiful. “Do I owe you anything for the questions I ask this time, Luke? Do I have to earn them?”

“I’ll take it out on you later, if you like.” I raised the wine glass to her in a toast. “Ask away.”

Evie closed her eyes and floated in silence for a long moment. When she finally turned over again, she swam back toward me.

“Fire came out of my hands today, Luke.” She treaded water just a few feet away from me now. “I do have questions. A lot of them. But I might be a little too stunned still to know where to start.”

“First thing that comes to your mind, then,” I suggested. I set the wine glass on the edge of the pool and closed the gap between us. “We’ll begin reforming your knowledge of the world there.” My hand traveled up her inner thigh, cupping it just below her sex. “Where it takes us after...”

She closed her eyes and breathed a little heavier. “I doubt knowledge will take us *there*, Luke.”

I smiled and thought of Eden. “Wouldn’t be the first time.”

“Let’s start with that, then.” Evie moved her foot against my pectoral and gently pushed me away from her. “All these cryptic hints about other times we’ve met. Other lives. You’re serious about that?”

“So serious it hurts, love.” I moved my other hand to her waist and pulled her against me. “Last time we met, you didn’t fight my charms so damned hard.”

“And when was the last time?”

I licked my lips. “Sixty-nine.”

She laughed. “Luke!”

“Mm. I like where your head’s at, darling. But no—at least, not unless you’re interested.” I chuckled. “Nineteen-sixty-nine, I mean. The year, not the devious sex act.”

“What you said about being a one-woman kind of man back in Lust last night, though...”

“I always have been.” I took her ankle in my hands and pulled myself closer to her. This time when my lips found her skin, I kissed her inner knee. “You’re the one woman. It’s always been you.”

“And when you said that you lost the love of your life—”

“I lost you.” My lust eased into a different kind of aching then. Admitting it was admitting that I’d endured the greatest pain I’d imagined, over and over again since the beginning of time itself.

“Nineteen-sixty-nine was fifty years ago, Luke.”

“Give or take.”

“So the last time we were together... what? I died of old age twenty-five years ago then...reincarnated as a baby in Newark, or something?”

“No.” I could hold her, but I still couldn’t look at her. Not while we spoke of this. “No, you died in my arms. You were twenty-three.”

“But...” Evie made a small noise of frustration. “One-woman man. I highly doubt you’ve just been alone for the last fifty years—and there are some twenty-five years unaccounted for in your timeline, from before I was born.”

“That happens.” I held her at a distance by her waist and stared down at my reflection in the water. As the mist rose up, it felt like divining in a dark mirror surrounded by smoke. I could see the pain in my eyes and clenched my jaw as I tried to choke it down. “When those bastards get to you before I do. When I fail to keep you safe.”

“Angels, you mean.”

Finally, I forced myself to meet her gaze as I nodded.

“Angels, love. Every damn time. Over and over again, ever since you were first created.”

“And that’s what you’ve been trying to keep me safe from. Mike and Gabe—”

“They’re Exalted, yes. Angels. High-ranking ones, too. Celestial beings of Heaven, with all the powers that their station provides.” I glowered. “Which they use to take you away from me.”

I let go of her waist and turned away. Beneath the water, my hands curled into fists.

Here I’d been hoping that Evie and I could relax while I explained to her our many pasts—but it was impossible to do that without reliving every time she’d been stabbed with spears, shot full arrows, peppered with bullets. Beheaded. Burned. Drowned.

All because of my love for her.

All because of me.

I was tense. Furious and full of shame all over again. Evie must have sensed it, too.

She swam toward me—then, past me.

At first, I feared she was going to leave.

If she tried, I would have to chain her to my bed and explain the rest of this to her from there, with her wrists bound over her head.

But she didn't leave—only moved behind me and wrapped her arms around my neck. Her breasts pressed into my back and our legs kicked together in unison. Sometimes brushing gently against each other, sometimes clashing, sometimes missing each other completely.

But the feeling of her body against mine once again...

That was enough to calm my guilt and my rage—and everything else, as well.

"You're hurt," she said gently. With one arm, she released me. Her fingers brushed down against the skin of my arm, cool and light despite the heavy heat all around.

Evie's fingertips traced the shallow cut that Michael's spear had scraped across my bicep. Already, it was healing, but not *healed*.

She touched the skin around it like it was her hands that could close the wound.

"It's nothing, love." The angels could have sliced me to pieces and I would have said the same, as long I could have Evie this near to the biggest cut of my flesh that was left when they were done.

"It's not just there, though." Evie's fingertips traced up the veins of my arm, all the way to their source. She reached around me and placed her palm against my chest. My cold, black heart pounded to life at her touch. "You're hurt here too, Luke. I can see it in your eyes and hear it in your voice."

"I am." That, I could admit, and easily. Even if it was only to her. "Every time I lose you, love. It hurts more and more."

"But here, in the Inferno..." Evie bit her lip as her eyes flicked up to meet mine. "I'm safe from all of that?"

"Everything I do, darling, I do to keep you safe," I professed.

Evie nodded, taking it all in.

"I need you to tell me something, Luke," she said after a long moment.

"Anything." Her palm burned against my skin. Just like that, I was desperate to take her all over again. Scoop her up out of the water without pausing to put on robes, carry her up to my bed naked and dripping wet, and ravish her once more.

But of course, that wasn't what she was asking for right now.

Not yet.

“I need you to tell me a story,” Evie said.

I let my palm hover over hers on my chest, not daring to touch her again.

Not yet.

“A story, is it?”

“Yes.” She nodded again and let her fingers slip from my skin as she swam to the edge of the pool again. My heart nearly shattered at how quickly and how badly I began to miss her touch. “I need you to tell me everything. All of it. From the beginning.”

I turned to face her. A smile tugged at the corners of my lips as it spread across my face.

She didn’t hate me for all the times I’d failed her.

Evie’s graces were more than just good.

They were made of divinity itself.

“I can do that,” I said as I swam toward her. “If it’s a story you want, my love... A story, you shall have.”

“Good,” Evie said. “But not here.”

She pressed her palms against the edge of the pool and lifted herself up out of the water. Rivers and tributaries slid down off her skin as the muscles of her shoulders rippled and her body was revealed to me in full.

I tried to think of something clever to say, but for once, I couldn’t.

I was in awe.

I was in love.

Out of the pool, the steam hung round Evie’s body, draped thin like Grecian cloth. As it wafted around her, I glimpsed delectable expanses of pale skin flushed pinkish by the heat. Sweat beaded her long, elegant neck and trailed down her delicate collarbones. She shimmered with it; shone like she was coated in angel’s blood.

As Evie moved to the robes and towels that the attendants had left us, I saw hips, broad and inviting. I saw a waist so lovely and slender I could have wrapped it up in my two broad, rough palms and captured her completely.

I saw her tits, round and firm. Evie’s breasts were peaked with stiff, rosy nipples and my mouth went wet as I imagined how delicious it would be to take one—just one, even for a moment—into my mouth. Her golden hair hung down over her shoulder, nearly all the way to her waist.

She dried herself off with a towel and wrapped herself in a robe. When she glanced back at me, her eyes were hooded, but focused. Like a cobra, still deciding whether or not to strike.

In that stare, I saw her in every iteration of her.

I saw my past, my present, and any future there could ever be for me all collide.

My cock went stiff as I saw an eternity in the promise of her lips, soft and full.

My balls ached for her as I saw sin in her curves—and when I looked into her eyes, I could’ve sworn I saw God.

“Come to bed with me, Luke?”

I took a breath, then another.

How long I had been waiting to hear those perfect words from her perfect mouth.

“Of course, love.” I swam to the edge of the pool in an instant. “Thought you’d never ask.”

EVIE

When Luke and I entered his suite this time, he didn't have to carry me.

We stepped inside together, my hand clasped in his.

What had just happened between us in the hot springs was...

Magical.

Earth-shattering.

Pure sin.

Sex like that...I'd never felt anything like it in my entire life. It was what sex was supposed to feel like. It had lived up to my every fantasy—the exact fantasies that had fallen so short when it came to anyone else.

After Luke, I wasn't sure how I could ever go back.

It wasn't just the sex, either. Seeing him vulnerable afterwards—seeing him hurt—it had stirred something inside me just as moving as any orgasm.

He'd shown me his pain. His grief and his regrets, too.

I still didn't understand them completely, but I knew I needed to.

My life had been turned upside down over the last few days. And no matter how I felt for Luke, I had to remember that I was still his captive here.

It was like playing chess, in a way. I needed to know more about my opponent—my husband—before I decided what my next move would be.

“So then.” I let my fingers slip from Luke’s as I wandered around the lounges in the sitting area. “This is what Hell really looks like. A couple of sofas, some old books, and a fireplace.”

Luke chuckled. “It disappoints you?”

“No.” I moved to the bookshelf and let my fingers hover over the titles again. They really were beautiful. Both ancient and pristine—a rare pairing indeed. “This just seems more like Heaven to me, is all.”

“Then you’ve never been to Heaven, obviously.”

“Obviously.” I turned my head to glance at him. “What’s it like?”

Luke came up behind me, placing his hands on my hips. It left me feeling a little like Rose in *Titanic*—only instead of feeling the high winds of the open seas on my face, I had millions of dollars of old books in front of me. Even better, really.

“Have you ever been on a cruise ship?” Luke asked.

“Adam and I were supposed to go on one this summer for our honeymoon,” I said with a glower.

Even just thinking about Adam right now put me in a bad mood.

“So, you haven’t, then.”

“My mother’s a grade school teacher,” I said with a little laugh. I turned around and braced my back against the bookshelf. “My dad works in waste management. On their salaries, the closest thing to a cruise I’ve ever been on was a rowboat—and even that ended up sinking in the end.”

“For the best,” Luke assured me.

“Is it?” I laughed. “And here I thought you were about to promise me one.”

“Not a chance, love. On a cruise ship, you’re trapped in a carefully curated environment.” Luke rested his hand on the shelf behind my head, pinning me in place. “You’re stuffed with questionable seafood from a buffet everyone and their dog has breathed all over, served under-boozed sugar cocktails and dragged around on a strict schedule of activities all day.”

“I like activities.” I arched an eyebrow and gave Luke a teasing half smirk. “And at least there are dogs.”

“Hell has dogs too. Haven’t you ever heard of Cerberus?”

“I thought three-headed mutts were more of a Hades thing.”

“There were plenty of puppies in that litter.” Luke placed his hands on my hips again and smiled down at me. “Later, I’ll take you down to

Indulgence and we'll whistle for him. He'll eat table scraps right out of your hands."

"You're funny, Luke." I raised the back of my hand to his cheek and ran it across the soft bristles of his stubble.

"Glad you're finally admitting it, love."

"You talk about being trapped and catered to in Heaven." I turned my hand over to touch his jawline, strong and sharp, with my fingertips. "But isn't that exactly what you've done with me here in the Inferno?"

"I made this place for you, Evie," Luke said softly. His eyes narrowed and his gaze hardened. "Only you. To please you. To tempt you. To keep you safe. If it isn't to your liking, you only need ask for what you want."

"No, this is all very much to my liking," I admitted. "You've done a very good job, Luke."

Luke raised a finger to the silk lapel of my robe, just over the swell of my breasts. "It's always a pleasure to please."

My pussy clenched. We'd only fucked a little while ago, and already he was making good on all that talk of tempting me all over again.

I swallowed and changed the subject. "Don't you owe me a story?"

"I thought you wanted me to take you to bed, darling." Luke's voice was a dark, suggestive purr.

"It's early still...*darling*." And if I wanted to keep my wits about me while I decided how to process everything I learned today, being in bed with Luke was the last thing I needed right now. I glanced at one of the sofas instead. "Why not spin your yarn here in front of the fire instead?"

Luke gripped my hips a little harder and pulled me to him.

"All right. But..." Luke teased the sash on my robe, slowly pulling it free. "You'll need to get this robe off first."

I stared up at him, stunned. "You can't really be ready to go again already. Haven't you ever heard of a refractory period?"

"Not when it comes to you, love." Luke moved his lips to my ear. "But that wasn't what I had in mind this time."

"No?" That would be a first—if he really meant it.

"Come sit on the lounge and find out."

I sucked my lower lip into my mouth, then nodded.

Part of me was just curious as to what Luke possibly had planned for my naked body now, if not more sex.

The other part of me almost trembling with the faint, ill-advised hope that more sex was secretly exactly what Luke had in mind.

In front of the lounge, Luke nodded at my robe.

Take it off, that nod said.

Even though it wasn't a direct order, I was almost too quick to obey anyway.

"Beautiful," Luke breathed. His eyes swept down my body, following the path of the robe as it slipped to the floor at my feet. Then, he took me by the shoulders and stared into my eyes. "Now. Sit, Evie."

This time, I moved a little more slowly.

I couldn't disobey Luke directly, but I hoped he'd soon learn that I was much more compliant if I wasn't being forced.

"Good," Luke said once I was seated. He dropped to his knees in front of me. I had to clench my own knees together to stop myself from instinctively spreading them. "Stay still."

His hands still hovered over my skin, just above my hips, like there was some kind of forcefield around me preventing him from making contact.

Like I was one of those old books up in his suite, the kind that was too precious to lay a finger on without pulling on gloves first.

Like I was somehow too holy to touch.

"I don't think I can sit any stiller than this," I said.

"No. But you're hurt too, love." Luke's hands shifted up my body to hover over my shoulders. When I glanced down at one, I saw a scrape across it. Probably from rolling around in so much broken glass earlier. When I closed my eyes, I could feel other scrapes and scratches and bruises all over my body as well. My body was relaxed after all the sex and the hot springs, and at least I knew now that all the cuts were clean, but they did ache and sting a little if I paid attention to them.

"They're just little hurts, Luke. Nothing to worry about." I nodded to his arm. The cut on it was covered by his robe, but it had been far deeper than anything I'd gotten today.

"Your skin is far too pretty to stay all beaten and battered like this, darling." Luke licked his lips and nodded. "I'm going to heal you, Evie. You might feel a little tingle as I do."

"Only a little?" I found a rare chance to smirk at Luke, and took it.

“For now, love.” A little glimmer returned to the mournful blue in his eyes, if only for a moment. “But later...”

I drew in a deep breath and let my eyes fall closed as Luke’s palms made contact with my skin.

I didn’t know exactly what he meant by *healing me*, but as he brushed his hands over my shoulders, I felt the tingle he’d promised. It was like being too close to an electric fence. That moment, just before your knuckles brushed against the live wire when it was too late to stop yourself from connecting with the current—it felt like that, but completely localized.

If he hadn’t warned me to stay still, I would have flinched. Instead, my muscles merely tensed as the phantom sting eased out into a gentle warmth.

When Luke moved his hands away from my shoulders again, the scrapes were gone. Completely vanished.

Like it had never happened at all.

“That’s...amazing.” I was willing to accept that all of the power and mythology surrounding Luke was true, but I still couldn’t help but be in awe of it. “How did you do that?”

“The same way you conjured fire in the palms of your pretty little hands earlier, love.” Luke dipped his lips to my shoulder and kissed the place where the scrape had been. “I felt the power inside me and had faith.”

Luke smoothed his hands all over my body, occasionally pausing to heal little nicks and scratches and cuts. He wasn’t greedy with the way he touched me—but he wasn’t entirely chaste about it either.

No matter how the rest of my body had fared during the crash and skirmish earlier, I knew for a fact that my tits had come out of it unharmed—as had my ass.

“You promised me a story, Luke,” I reminded him. *Again*. Why was he stalling?

“And you’ll have it,” he assured me, holding my hip in one hand and dipping down to stroke my thigh with the other. “It’s just a somewhat complex tale. I’m trying to decide where to start.”

“The beginning is usually as good of a place as any.” My eyes met his, and I realized how close his lips were to mine. “I never really liked things that open *in media res*.”

Luke chuckled. “No, I suppose after the last few days you’ve had, you wouldn’t.”

“The beginning, then,” I prompted him.

“In the beginning, there was only darkness—and then God said *let there be light*.” Luke rose and moved to the lounge next to me. He leaned his back against the armrest and popped a foot up onto the cushion behind me—a position that threatened to flash me his cock and balls alike beneath his robe. “Stop me if you’ve heard this one before.”

“You don’t have to start at the beginning of the *universe*, Luke.”

“Our story starts only a few days after.” He reached for my body and pulled me over to lie on top of him. “Seemed as good of a place as any.”

My body fit against Luke’s so perfectly, it felt like it almost had to be fate. I rested my cheek against the little hollow over his collarbone and slipped my arm beneath his.

His scent was faint now, but still darkly spicy. Masculine, earthy and clean.

Being close to him like this felt...safe. Felt right.

Even if I still didn’t fully understand why.

“Our story, then.” Luke sounded satisfied as he wound his arms around me in return. “It starts in a garden. The most perfect garden that ever was.”

“Eden?” I guessed.

“Yes, love. Eden.” Luke’s hand cupped my waist as his thumb traced the outline of my lowest rib. “God made man and woman, and He said they were good. You were the first, you know. A whole new creation.”

“You’re saying I was Eve.” I laughed. I couldn’t help it. It was just too ridiculous. “Evelyn, Evie, Eve...that’s a little on the nose, don’t you think?”

“It would be, yes. If it was true.” Luke tapped his thumb against my rib. “But you were not made of some weak-willed man’s ribcage, love. You were your own creature—entirely. Before Eve, there was you.”

“Eve was the first woman, Luke.” I tapped my fingers against his chest. “I didn’t spend my entire childhood having my knuckles smacked by nuns wielding rulers so I could grow up and forget my Christian mythology.”

“You were the first, darling,” Luke said again. “And a tough act to follow, too.”

“If not Eve, then who?” I fought back an eye roll. “I don’t remember the part of Genesis where Adam gets a divorce.”

“Lilith,” Luke breathed. He moved his hand to my jawline and turned my face toward his. “A woman strong enough, willful enough, radiant enough to match the first man.” Luke laughed. “That was the idea, anyway. But you...you outshone him at every turn.”

“Lilith...” I furrowed my brow. I knew that name—and I knew it didn’t mean anything good. “Mother of Demons. I don’t think I like where this story’s going.”

“Because you’ve been raised knowing only the smear campaign they waged against you.” Luke’s hand shifted again, this time so his thumb could smooth across my lower lip. “It’s a shame you were so young in the nineties. You completely missed out on Lilith Fair.”

“Woodstock for feminists.” I laughed. “That does sound like something I would’ve liked. And where were you while I was wandering Eden?”

“I’d only just fallen.” Luke winced as he rolled his shoulders back. “Or, well, I was pushed, actually—but we all like put our own flourishes on the ways we’ve been wronged.”

“You rebelled against Heaven.” I wanted to bite his thumb. I nearly did, before he moved down to my chin instead. “I remember this part. Lucifer and his infernal pride.”

“My greatest sin, they say.” Luke shrugged. “It wasn’t pride that came before this fall, though. It was you, love.”

“Of course.” I smiled and shook my head knowingly. “There was only one woman in the world to fuck, and poor you—she was already married.”

“You weren’t *married*,” Luke protested. “You hadn’t even shagged that idiot calling himself a man yet.”

“Only one man in the world, and I wouldn’t fuck him?”

“You wanted to be on top. He had...certain qualms against that.” Luke ran his thumb from my chin down the center of my neck. “It was your free will that the rebellion was about, though—not fucking. I hadn’t invented sex quite yet.”

“*You* invented sex.” I stared up at him, not yet sure whether he was serious or just pulling my leg. “You’re impossible, Luke.”

“So I’ve been told,” Luke agreed. “Often by you.”

“What was it about free will that the other angels didn’t like?” I asked.

“The free part of it, mostly.” Luke smirked. “And the will. My six loyal comrades and I felt that you deserved full knowledge so you could make rational, reasonable decisions. Without knowing the truth of the world you were in and the full awareness of your existence, how would you know if your decisions were good or evil?”

“That’s...perfectly Kantian.” He could have been paraphrasing a textbook on Immanuel Kant’s Categorical Imperative at this rate.

“And you can find Kant himself down in Heresy on the sixth floor for exactly that reason,” Luke assured me. “I’ll introduce you later, if you like.”

“What did the other angels want, then?”

“For you to be stupid and naked without ever having the chance to live up to your potential.” Luke scoffed. “Like animals. It was degrading. It pained me to see you, in all your glory, living like that—although, they did have one point.”

“Which was?”

Luke’s eyes glimmered as he cupped my breast in one hand and pinched my ass from behind with the other.

“You’ve always looked *very* good in the nude.”

This time when I smacked him, it was playful and light.

“Terrible,” I chided. “So, you rebelled. You lost, I take it.”

“That part of the story is true, unfortunately. We were...outnumbered. Some wars are forged from battles lost long before they even began.”

I slid my hand down Luke’s back to the twisted scars on either side of his spine.

“They took your wings,” I breathed.

“Ripped them from me like it was dinnertime and I was the Christmas goose,” Luke confirmed. “And those of my comrades along with me. After the Fall, we retreated to Hell. It was chaos there. Demons running rampant with no direction, no code, no creed. I brought order to it.” Luke pinched my nipple and I gasped—then, he gestured to the room around us. “As you can see here.”

“When did we meet?” I almost felt stupid for asking...but I had to hand it to Luke. As far as stories went, this tale was a juicy one. I was hooked.

“I was just getting to that point,” Luke said. “Once I’d restructured Hell and brought the demons under control, I was feeling...well, prideful,

you could say.”

“Big surprise.”

“I thought maybe I could make my way back to Heaven for a second round.” Luke chuckled. “Stupid idea. I already told you that part, though.”

“Your Eglantine roses. The ones outside Limbo. I remember.”

“And after I fell on my ass all over again... there you were. A beautiful visage there at the edge of Eden, eyes full of tears even as you laughed at my defeat.”

“I was crying?” I frowned. “Why?”

“Your man, Adam, of course.” Luke took my hand in his and traced the curve of the ring on my finger. “In every lifetime where there is a you, there is, inevitably, a him. And inevitably, he fucks it up. God only knows why.”

“What was it this time?” I felt a spark of rage catch in my chest all over again as I recalled seeing Adam in Paradise last night. “If we were the only people on Earth, it couldn’t have been an orgy.”

“No. It was sex, though. I’d only just come up with idea of bodies rubbing together for pleasure and warmth, and somewhere through the ether, you must have caught on.”

“I wanted to be on top.” I let out a loud, full body laugh. “Oh, God. He’s still like that, you know. He only ever wanted to do missionary beneath the blankets with all the lights off.”

“Bloody idiot.” Luke laughed along with me as his hand strayed to my hip again. He squeezed me tight, his thumb resting in the little valley where my pelvis met my thigh. It made my cunt purr. “The Almighty hardly created light just to keep pleasure in the dark.”

“What did you do, when you found me crying?” I asked.

“And laughing at me,” Luke reminded me. “I like to think it was the first time anyone had laughed at all.”

“If I’d just watched Satan himself fall on his ass trying to climb the thorns of a rose bush...” I shrugged. “You can hardly blame me.”

“Can hardly blame you for anything, love.” Luke moved the tip of his nose to the crook of my neck and nuzzled me there. “You made me laugh too. Made me realize how ridiculous I was being. As you’ve done time and again ever since.”

“So, we became...friends.” I smiled softly. “That’s...nice, actually.”

“Oh, no, love.” Luke shook his head. “I gave you knowledge of good and evil, then we fucked like wild, half-mad things until your screams and moans shook the first birds from the first trees.”

I bit my lip and clenched my knees together as I felt Luke’s cock stiffen beneath my ribs. “That...does sound more like you.”

“Couldn’t leave you wanting, could I? Besides...” Luke kissed the top of my head. “No one had ever done it before—and we’ve been trailblazers, you and I.”

“You really do believe you invented sex.” I tucked my knuckles beneath Luke’s chin and tilted his face up toward me. As I looked into his eyes, I searched for some sign that he was joking—or worse, lying—but they were clear and true.

“It might’ve been you, to be fair,” Luke admitted. “It was a very long time ago, and you *were* always the more imaginative one. Or maybe... maybe we thought of it at the same time. Maybe it came to us in the same wet, wicked dream.”

Luke curled his fingers around my shoulder with a familiarity—like he really had loved me since Eden. Since the beginning of time itself.

“What happened next?” I was suddenly very aware of my breathing, my heartbeat. “Something must have gone wrong.”

“Of course it did,” Luke said with a nod. “I’d stolen you from Adam and spoiled the master plan of Heaven along with it. The Exalted were furious with me—and they knew, even then, that I loved you.”

“The Devil really can feel love, then.” I smiled. “Sister Mary Martha wouldn’t be happy to learn that.”

“Oh, Evie. You have no idea.” Luke’s fingers shifted to my breast again, caressing me idly. “I love many things. I love the Earth. I love humanity. I love the way sky catches fire at sunset and the way gin burns all the way down like cold wind on Christmas morning. But mostly...”

Luke moved his fingers to my chin and tilted my head back as far as it would go. He gave me plenty of time to pull away—but I didn’t want to.

Luke’s kisses burned stronger than any booze I’d ever known. His lips tasted like a storm rolling in off the sea. Salt. Darkness. Chaos.

Peace.

I didn’t pull away from the kiss because I didn’t want to.

I wasn’t sure I ever really had.

“Mostly, I just love you,” Luke whispered against my lips. “Always have. Always will.”

“I think we’re getting distracted from your tale, Luke.”

“They killed you because of my love, Evie,” Luke breathed against my lips. “I already told you that part.”

I frowned. He had, and that part concerned me.

It was what bound me here to the Inferno.

It was thing stopping me from making a choice to stay here with Luke out of free will—and the thing forcing me to stay with him for the protection he offered me instead.

“And then...you started a war.” My frown deepened. Up until this point, the story had been almost charming.

But as much as I disliked the idea of being murdered by angels, I hated the idea of being the cause of warfare even more.

My father had served in Afghanistan before I was born. My grandfather had been drafted to Korea before that.

Neither of them had ever talked about it if they could help it. But I knew the rattle of gunfire and the booming of explosives still played in their minds. The stories they brought back with them could only be told under the influence of whiskey or too many glasses of wine.

Up until that point, Luke’s story had been a romance, though an unconventional one.

But there was nothing romantic about men fighting and dying over a woman who was already dead.

“I don’t like the idea of a war being fought over me,” I whispered.

“Not *over* you, love. *For* you.” Luke shook his head. “I am a vengeful man, Evie. They had to pay for what they’d done. But I am not a cruel man—not particularly, anyway. I’ve fought war after war for you, but I’ve never truly enjoyed any of it.”

“Which is why you formed your treaty,” I guessed. “You hoped that maybe you’d be able to stop the cycle.”

“That education of yours suits you, love.” The teasing was gone from Luke’s voice again. “Yes. I made the treaty with the angels in the hopes that I could better protect you. It’s never done me any favors before—but this time, I’m doing everything I can to make sure it will.”

Every time he spoke of my death, he turned so serious it was almost hard to recognize him as the same man who was constantly smirking and

winking and flirting with me.

After an entire lifetime of lost love and warfare, he obviously had some stories he couldn't bring himself to tell either.

"You're a good storyteller, Luke." I pressed my fingers to his chest and nuzzled against his neck. "Tell me more."

His touch had healed me.

Maybe mine could heal him too.

A low growl left his throat as I stroked his chest. His cock throbbed stiff against my ribs.

"Fuck the story." Luke rolled our bodies on the lounge so his was on top of mine. He grabbed me and pulled me into another kiss. This one came fast and rough. When he broke it, his eyes seemed darker somehow.

Apparently, he had a different kind of healing in mind.

"Do you still believe me, Evie?" His thumbs stroked my cheekbones, tender but hard.

"Yes," I breathed. I still didn't want to, but I believed every word from his lips. "I do."

"And do you trust me?"

"I...I think so." I licked my lips and nodded. "I think I do."

"Then forget the story for a moment. I want to give you another memory." His hand dove between my legs. "One that makes the tale of our star-crossed love easier for both of us to bear."

"My memory isn't between my legs, Luke."

"No." Luke chuckled. "No, it's not. But the memory of how I made love to you last night, before all of this was stolen away from you all over again—I'd like to give you that, very much."

"And if I don't want another memory?" I was half sick of remembering at this point, and Luke's hand between my thighs, tracing up and down the lips of my slit, was making the present feel a little more important. "What if I want to make a new one?"

"Even better," he purred against my lips. "I'll make as many memories like this with you as you like."

LUKE

I loved her like this. Staring up at me in awe, thighs spread, as I kissed down her naked body all the way down to her hot, slick cunt.

“You’re a beauty, Evie.” I breathed the words against her hip. I nipped at the flesh just over her hip bone, then dragged my teeth across her skin until I felt her shudder. “Let me make you feel like one.”

“Keep kissing me like that, Luke,” she whimpered. Her eyes closed as my lips moved to the inside of her thigh, pressing against the little hollow where her leg met her cunt. “And you can make me feel however you want.”

My need for her burned, dark and unrelenting, but I forced myself to go slow.

She was still so exhausted from earlier, and I couldn’t risk wearing her out.

Not before I was done with her. Only then would I let her rest.

The fire crackled from across the room. Its warmth washed over our bodies as I tore my robe away. Once free of it, I hooked my arms beneath her ass and lifted her to my lips.

I kissed up and down her cunt first, relishing the way the silken curls of her pubic hair tickled against my lips.

It was just as golden as the rest of her. Just as perfect.

“Have I told you yet how much I love these little curls of yours?” A growl rippled through my chest as I nuzzled against her cunt. “So soft and

sweet. Womanly.”

Evie let out a high, breathy laugh. “You’d be the first. Adam hated it when I didn’t wax for him. I was supposed to have it done the morning before the ceremony, but...”

“Thank God you didn’t. I like you best just like this. Wild. Untamed. All woman—and all mine.” I pressed my nose between her folds and breathed in their perfume. “And the way the hair traps your scent... You smell like spring, love. Just like spring.”

I moved my hands up to her breasts and squeezed them gently. Her nipples were hard beneath my fingers, little knots of pleasure amidst the softness of her tits. I was already hard for her again, but the tiny moans that left her lips as I teased her nipples made my cock painfully stiff.

I was in desperate need of release, but first, even more, I needed hers.

My tongue slipped between the lips of her cunt. I traced each of her folds with focus and precision. I wanted to taste every part of her. Her sweetness. Her salt. And beneath all that, that indescribable thing that pushed me to the edge of madness and grounded me in sanity all at once.

“You smell fucking breedable, Evie.”

“Do I?”

“Does that make you hot, love? The knowledge that you make my balls swell with cum and my cock so hard I could take you and fuck you pregnant in an instant?” I sucked her clit into my mouth as her scent took hold of me. I was losing control, and I loved it.

Almost as much as I loved her.

“It might,” she whispered. Her fingers raked through my hair as I lapped at her. When I glanced up to meet her eyes, there was a flash of fear in them, though. “Will you?”

I smirked. “I might.” Of all the things we’d done throughout the ages, we hadn’t done *that* before.

She bit her lip as her body tensed...but then slowly, like she had just remembered something important, her mouth eased into a smile once more.

“Well, you can’t.” She reached up to run a hand across her bicep. “Birth control implant. Sorry to spoil your fun.”

I laughed. “You’ve far from spoiled anything, love. But for now, let a man have his fantasies.”

“Is that what you are now?” She grabbed my hair again and tugged on it gently, preventing me from diving back between her thighs. “A man?”

“For you, Evie...yes.” My grin broadened hungrily. “For everyone else, I’m the Devil—but for you, I’m all man indeed.”

Her grasp on my hair loosened as she closed her eyes and smiled back at me. I took advantage of the moment. Evie gasped and giggled as I scooped her up in my arms and stood.

“Taking me to bed after all, Luke?”

“No. But I do think there was talk of sixty-nine earlier.” I carried her to the rug in front of the fire and eased our bodies down onto it. “And if you need assurance of my manhood, darling...I’m more than happy to comply.”

I lay down and grabbed her thigh, dragging it over my face. She straightened as she straddled me. She was almost even more beautiful from this angle. I could see the way her folds glistened with honey, the perfect teardrops of her firm, full breasts hanging above her flat stomach and delicate ribs. Her hair fell down her back in a gorgeous waterfall of waves. It framed her face, saint-like and holy. In the glow of the fire, the tendrils crowned her with golden light—a halo.

I took her in for just a breath or two—then I tugged her down onto my lips and licked her cunt like the devil I was.

Her thighs trembled against my cheeks. She clenched them to keep herself upright—but with a few lashes of my tongue against her clit, her body gave out for me in full surrender. Her lips brushed the base of my cock as she tumbled forward.

I let up for just long enough to realize how hard my cock was for her. She traced the veins of my shaft all the way up to my tip, then moved her lips to it. I felt her tongue against my glans, tentative at first, then daring as she tasted my precum like it was the first time.

She wrapped her lips around my cock greedily. Fire blazed in my veins as she flicked her tongue against that sensitive ridge where my tip met the thickness of my shaft.

It only made me double my efforts on her slit. I ate her out with that same hunger, that same greed, and she sucked me so hard and so sweet and so perfect that were she really a saint, she could have even made me, the Devil himself, devote myself to a life for God.

Hell—I'd wear the collar, don a hairshirt, serve communion and devote myself to anything she wanted, just as long as we could do this again.

Evie's honey pooled over my lips. Around my cock, her mouth was as hot and glorious as the flames of Hell itself.

My balls tensed as she took a breath, then swallowed me down her throat. She choked on my cock—just once—a little spasm that only pulled my shaft deeper into her while she got used to the feel of being that fucking full.

My balls tensed as her little nose pressed against them.

Fuck. I was so close to coming already—

And I wasn't about to let myself until she came first.

I grabbed her ass, pressing her cunt even more firmly against my mouth. I made out with the lips of her pussy just as passionately as I kissed the rest of her.

It didn't matter what lifetime it was. She was mine.

I'd remind her of that fact with as many orgasms as it took.

Her moans were muffled by my cock as she swallowed it. When she pulled back up to breathe, each cry of pleasure was released. With every thrash of my tongue against her clit, her moans grew higher and higher, a chorus of need that could only come to holy completion when it finally found the sacred chaos of release.

When she orgasmed, her clit throbbed violently against my tongue. Her legs shook and her body quivered so beautifully, it was impossible to do anything but join her.

I spent myself in bursts of hot, sticky seed. The first went down her throat, right to her stomach. The next, as she pulled up, gushed out over her tongue until her mouth was full of my taste.

We couldn't bring ourselves to stop, though. Not even then.

I kissed her clit until its throbbing eased out into short, sporadic tremors.

She swallowed my seed and licked every last drop of it clean from my tip.

Only then, when we were both liquid with exhaustion, did I pull her off of me. Our bodies rolled as I shifted to face her. I hovered over her, just as in awe of her perfection as she was of mine.

"That was good," she breathed. Her chest rose and fell as she panted beneath me. "Really...really good."

“Mm. Glad you think so, love. Are you hungry?” I smoothed her hair away from her face. It was splayed out beneath her on the rug like a brilliant sunrise. “We really shouldn’t keep skipping dinner like this.”

“I’m more tired than anything.” She raised her mouth up to mine and licked my lips, still slick with her honey. “And even if we did skip dinner... you certainly ate well enough tonight for both of us.”

I kissed her again, then took her into my arms. “I certainly did.”

Then, to the gentle music of Evie’s purrs and satisfied sighs, I carried her to bed and tucked her in.

SHE SLEPT ALL NIGHT, and all day as well. First, in my arms, like an exhausted little kitten rescued from a storm. Then, when morning came, curled up in my bed, silent and sweet as I sat across the room, watching her dream.

Through the ages, every time I found her, she had a different name, a different form—but always, she was lovely, and always, she was mine.

Still, I couldn’t help but smile as I watched her roll and sigh amongst the pillows.

I’d seen Evie as a radiant redhead, her freckled face painted blue as she galloped her horse into battle. She’d been a ravishing brunette with olive-toned cheekbones, and a raven-haired beauty with lips made to sin.

I liked her best like this, though. Golden and blonde, so angelic in her own right, with soft, full curves and long, dark lashes that fluttered gently through her dreams.

It was dark out again by the time she finally awoke.

“Luke?” Evie rolled on the mattress, patting around it like she was searching for my warmth.

“I’m here, love.” I closed the book I’d been reading—the copy of *Pride and Prejudice* that she’d brought to Limbo—and placed it aside. I took the box of chocolates from the vanity, unwinding the red ribbon from it as I rejoined her in bed. “How did you sleep?”

“Like I was dead.” Evie looked to the window and frowned. “God. How long was I out for?”

“As long as you needed.” I opened the box and pulled out a caramel creme. When I pressed it to her lips, she parted them to take the chocolate onto her tongue. “You’ve lost a day—but it’s no matter.”

“An entire day?”

“We’ll have more. As many as you like.” I smoothed her hair down over the side of her head. “You’ve been through so much; you could have slept for a week and I wouldn’t have held it against you.”

“A whole day...” Evie scowled, but her face softened as she chewed. “Wow. That’s...”

“Sinful?”

“Delicious, I was gonna say.” She closed her eyes and sighed as she swallowed. “But yeah, you do have a point. Sinful sounds about right.”

“Do you feel rested now?”

“Honestly?” Evie laughed and reached for another chocolate. She bit into it and purred so beautifully that my cock went hard in an instant. “I could probably take that week you were talking about—and I’m not sure I’d be rested even then.”

“We’ll have time, love,” I promised her. “All the time in the world.”

“Or out of it.” Evie let out a tiny laugh as she sucked her fingers clean. “I still can’t believe it.”

I placed my hand in Evie’s lap over the blankets and arched an eyebrow. “I’m happy to keep convincing you, if you like.”

“No. I mean...” Evie blushed as she looked away. “Maybe later. You can rest assured for now, though, I’m a believer. It’s just...”

“One hell of a thing to believe. I know.” I moved my fingertips to her hand and traced the little tendons that led up to her knuckles. “But I’m glad you believe me. It’s a precious thing to have—faith.”

“What now, though?” Evie bit her lip as she took my hand. “I believe you. I trust you. I just...don’t know what comes next, I guess.”

“You’d like to see your friends, I imagine.” I relished the way she moved her fingers into the spaces between mine. Willingly. I didn’t have to take anymore. Now, she was giving too. “They’re back at the Bellagio with my comrades still. I think a little reunion is long overdue.”

Evie’s eyes lit up. “You mean it?”

“I wouldn’t offer if I didn’t.”

“But the Bellagio is...Above. On Earth. Isn’t it?”

“The treaty is intact, love.” I raised her hand to my lips and kissed it. “And I’ll be with you. Legion and The Fourth as well. You’ll be protected. We’ll keep you safe.”

“And you’re...okay with me seeing my friends?” Evie’s eyes were hopeful, but still so full of doubt.

“Why wouldn’t I be?”

“Because you’ve been holding me captive for days at this point, maybe?”

“Only for your safety, love.” I kissed her hand again. “For your own good.”

“Maybe so. But...” Evie sighed. “Going back now...returning to my life like normal... I guess it all seems a little too good to be true.”

“I don’t know about normal. You’re still mine, Evie.” I tilted my head to the side, suddenly a little less certain. “Aren’t you?”

“I...I’m not sure.” Evie laughed. “The sex has been...”

“Incredible?”

“Sinful,” she said with a smile. “And as much as I’ve hated you over the last few days... there’s a lot to like about you, too.”

“Is there, now?”

“You’re kind,” Evie said. “You may be the Devil—”

“I very much am.”

“—but you tip waitresses with hundred-dollar bills.”

I shrugged. “It’s rude to stiff your waitstaff.”

“And your employees—or demons—or whatever they are...”

“A little of both, to be honest.”

“—they respect you. Not out of fear, but... out of loyalty.” Evie’s smile softened as she looked down at our hands, still wound together. “I can’t imagine someone like Legion would take orders from an asshole.”

“Not unless there was something in it for her.” I moved my free hand up to Evie’s cheek, still warm and flushed with sleep. “What else?”

“You protect me,” Evie whispered. She leaned into my touch and closed her eyes. “When Gabriel wanted to kill me outside Paradise...”

“Couldn’t exactly let them kill my wife, could I?”

“And you are funny, Luke.” Evie’s eyes met mine and glinted wickedly. “Even when you’re not.”

“All very good reasons for you to stay mine.” Forever. Just like we’d promised in our vows.

“But...”

“I can be funnier,” I offered.

“No.” Evie laughed and shook her head. “It’s not your sense of humor, Luke. It’s just...I have a life beyond you. Beyond the Inferno. And my life really doesn’t go back to normal if I stay with you, does it?”

I held her gaze for a long time.

I hadn't lied to her yet—but a lie was what she was hoping for. Waiting for.

"It doesn't," I said honestly. "But that's regardless of whether you stay with me or not."

"How?"

"The angels know who you are, love." I hated to break it to her, but if it hadn't sunk in yet, she needed to hear it. "Demons too. The fey, the Æsir, the Olympians...soon, they'll all know exactly who Evie Dawnstar, chosen bride of the Adversary himself, truly is."

"Which means..."

"Which means your life will always be in danger on some level or another." I ran my thumb across her cheekbone, anticipating tears—but to Evie's credit, none came. "I'm sorry, love. You were born with a mark on your heart and a target on your back. The moment I first kissed your cheek, I left my mark on your skin, too."

My thumb shifted to cover the little white starburst that graced Evie's cheek now, right there at the place where my lips had touched her back at the bar in Limbo.

"Your mark." Evie's wedding ring glittered as she moved her hand to her cheek as well. She folded her fingers over mine. "Your ring. Your name."

"Everyone wants a crack at the Devil at least once in their lives, darling. And for as long as you live..." I sighed. "You're a target, I'm afraid. They all know that getting to you is the best way to hurt me."

"You brought an awful lot of baggage into this marriage, Luke."

"So carry it with me." I didn't like to beg, but I could ask. Asking only ever hurt a little. "I'll carry yours; you carry mine."

"Like my cheating fiancé."

"Ex-fiancé," I corrected. "And I will never stray from you, Evie. Never. For me, it's only you. Only ever you."

"And the army of angels who want me dead?"

"I'll keep you safe."

"In exchange for what, Luke?"

I shifted my face closer to her, until my forehead rested against hers.

"Be mine," I told her. "Stay with me. Live with me here. Let me keep you safe."

“What if I’m not ready to spend the rest of my life in Hell with you?” Evie asked. “I have a thesis to finish. Students waiting for me back in Los Angeles. My parents are still in Vermont, Luke. I don’t know that I can bring myself to just leave them all behind.”

I closed my eyes.

The same old argument over a thousand lifetimes.

Some things never changed.

“If you need your life Above, we’ll figure something out,” I told her.

“Then you won’t mind if I wait until later to give you my answer.”

“Take all the time you want.” I moved our hands from her cheek so I could kiss her there, right over my mark, then rose. “But get dressed while you’re mulling it over. Your friends will be waiting for you at the Bellagio—and I have a surprise waiting for you there, too.”

CHARON DROVE us to the Bellagio in a new limo. After our little battle with the angels, the old one had been beyond repair.

“You’re staring, Luke.” Evie brushed her hair behind her ear and blushed prettily as she called me out.

“You look beautiful,” I said simply. I didn’t avert my gaze. I never needed to tell Evie how gorgeous she was. It was so apparent; it didn’t need to be said aloud. But I always enjoyed saying it anyway.

“Beautiful enough to gawk at, apparently.” She wore the red dress I’d had sent up for her, plus a pair of dangling ruby and black diamond earrings that matched her wedding ring. Her hair was curled into soft waves. Just a flick of eyeliner over her lash lines and a dust of eyeshadow completed the look.

“Yes.” I nodded as the limo rolled up to the Bellagio. “Beautiful enough to keep.”

Charon opened the door for us. I climbed out first, then offered Evie my hand.

“You’re sure we’re safe doing this?” Evie asked once both her feet were on solid ground again.

I loosened my grip on her hand, but she didn’t let go.

“Safer than you would be in Los Angeles,” I assured her. “You live in the City of Angels, love. This is the City of Sin—and it’s mine.”

I pointed across the gold-lit waters of Bellagio’s fountains to Legion and The Fourth, who stood all the way across the water on the other shore.

Legion gave us a grin and a glamorous wave. Even The Fourth graced us with a simple thumbs-up.

“They’ve scoped the place out for you,” Evie guessed.

“Not an angel in sight. But your friends...” I turned my gaze to the Bellagio’s doors as they opened.

Evie’s face broke into a grin as her friends rushed out, flanked by Malacoda and Moloch.

All three of the girls ran toward Evie at a full sprint, ignoring their heels entirely. Evie rushed for them as well. They collided at the edge of the fountain in a many-armed hug.

“Eves!” the dark-haired one, Joan, shouted triumphantly.

“We’ve missed you, you little runaway!” Bea, the redhead, added.

“How have you been?” Ava, the brunette, asked.

“I’m...good now. I think.” Evie pulled out of the hug, still grinning. “But I’ve missed you all too. So much.”

“Not exactly the trip to Vegas you were imagining, huh?” asked Joan.

“Oh my god, it’s so much better than we planned,” Bea gushed. “You should see the suite your new hubby upgraded us to after Adam and his goons left town.”

“Careful,” Malacoda warned Bea as he and Moloch approached the gaggle of women. “I *was* one of those goons just a few days ago. Or are y’all not countin’ me among their ranks anymore?”

“You were never like them,” Ava said, smiling through a blush. “We know that for sure now.”

“Aye, ye’ve finally proven yourself, lad.” Moloch chuckled as he clapped Malacoda on the shoulder. “Only took ye an entire year undercover at that blessed accounting firm to do it, mind...”

“The other night was...wild, wasn’t it?” Evie let out a little laugh. “I still don’t even remember all of it, but...”

“Luke hasn’t given you all of your memories back yet?” Joan glanced at me, outraged. “What the hell have you two been doing all this time? Fucking like rabbits?”

Evie and I shared a look.

“Um.” Evie turned to Ava. “Maybe you can help fill me in. After Paradise...”

“You really forgot your own wedding, huh?” Ava’s eyes went wide with disbelief. “Lord. We still have a lot of explaining to do, then.”

“Mal, Lock and Luke gave us all the angels and demons speech after Paradise.” Bea rolled her eyes. “We’re the good guys, they’re the bad ones, yadda, yadda.”

“And Adam wouldn’t stop calling you.” Joan shook her head, chuckling darkly. “And texting, for that matter.”

“He was trying to apologize,” Ava said.

“By the time we finally got back here, you were so fed up with him that you threw your phone in the fucking fountain.” Joan laughed a little louder. “Served him right, too. It’s probably still there.”

“My phone...” Evie glanced at the fountain, then slipped out of her heels. “Oh, fuck. I’ve still got part of my thesis in my notes on there.”

“Evie!” I checked my pocket watch, then ran after her.

The surprise was going to hit any minute—and I didn’t want her in the middle of it when it did.

“It’s fine, Luke. It’s not holy water.” Evie crawled over the edge of the fountain and splashed into it. She kicked up water and wandered deeper into the pool, searching for her phone. “Just let me do this, okay? If I can track it down, I might be able to save it.”

“Evie, wait!” I vaulted over the edge of the fountain as Evie paused. She dipped down to reach into the water—

Just in time for the light show to start.

A jet of water, glowing orange from the light beneath it, shot up at Evie’s face hard enough to knock her off her feet as music began to play.

I splashed toward her and knelt down in the wetness to pick her up. My hands smoothed her hair from her face as she spat water from her mouth.

“Sorry, love.” I chuckled a little as I pulled her away. “But I did promise you a surprise.”

“My surprise was being blasted in the face?”

“Well...”

Evie laughed. “Luke Dawnstar, I swear to your Almighty, if you make a cum joke right now, I’ll divorce you on the spot.”

“Then I won’t.” I held my tongue for a moment as I scooped her up in my arms. She was dripping wet and light as a feather. Her phone was clutched safely in her hands—just as soaked as she was. “Can you hear it, though?”

“Hear what?” Evie furrowed her brow and turned her head to the source of the music. “Luke...is that...”

“Springsteen,” I told her. “Your favorite.”

“It is.” Evie closed her eyes, beaming dreamily. “‘I’m on Fire.’ How fitting.”

“You like it?” I asked as I carried her to the fountain’s edge. I sat her down on it so she could dangle her feet in the water while the fountains shot flame-colored arcs of water through the night.

“I love it, Luke.” She took my hand and tugged me down to sit next to her.

My shoes were already ruined, and my trousers were soaked all the way up to my thighs—so I didn’t see any reason to deny her.

“Enough to reward me?” I asked.

Her eyes met mine, then slowly, she took my face into her cold, wet hands.

“I think so.” She moved her lips toward mine. “It’s a very good surprise.”

Her kiss was freezing cold and damp, but I was burning for her. The water turned to steam on my skin, floating up between us into the darkness.

“Get a room!” Bea cupped her hands around her mouth to shout at us from beyond the edge of the fountain. “You’re already married! You might as well!”

Evie laughed. “I think we’re annoying my friends, love.”

“Bea is just frustrated.” I stole another kiss and wrapped my arm around her. “She’s been locked up with lovesick little Ava swooning over Mal for days now—and Joan with Lock as well. You can hardly blame her.”

“I did wonder if there was something going on there with them.” Evie sighed and rested her head against my shoulder. “I don’t suppose you have another friend with a penchant for ancient religion, garlic bread and international banking, do you?”

I thought of Abaddon, who was still off on his mission seeking out the rest of the Fallen.

I didn’t know about the garlic bread...but the rest sounded about right.

“I just might,” I told her. “Let’s take care of your phone before we go playing matchmaker, though.”

Evie pressed the button to turn the phone on several times, then groaned as it failed to light up.

“It’s bricked.” She pouted and tried the button a few more times. “The circuit board has probably sucked up half the water in the fountain by this point.”

“Let’s see it.”

“You’re the Devil, Luke,” Evie reminded me as she placed the phone in my hand. “Not the god of broken electronics.”

“I have my ways, love.” I turned the phone over in my hand a few times, sending a little surge of heat to it, then passed it back to her. “Try it now.”

“It’s no use, Luke. It’s—oh.” Evie’s brows shot up in surprise as the phone lit up. Immediately, it started buzzing. “Oh...oh, no.”

“What’s wrong?” I glanced down at it over her shoulder. “If it’s still not working, I can try again.”

“No, it’s working. Just...” She turned the phone’s face so I could see it. Hundreds of missed calls were in her notifications, along with a slew of text messages and a warning that her voicemail inbox was full.

“All from Adam?” I guessed.

“Looks like.”

I curled my lips inward, then nodded.

“Go on, then. Call him back, if you like.”

“Oh, god no.” Evie shook her head quickly. “That relationship was never going to work out. I was settling.”

“Mm.” I pressed my face against the wet coils of her hair to hide my smile. “You’ll never have to do that again, if I have my way.”

“I have a feeling you’re right.” Evie moved to put the phone on the edge of the fountain next to her, but I stopped her before she could. “I’m just worried that my parents might have been calling. I’ve been so concerned about everything else that I didn’t even think about checking in with them. They don’t know I’m here in Vegas, and with my voicemail full... I’m an asshole, Luke. They must be worried sick.”

“They know where you are,” I assured her. “They shouldn’t be too worried. I’ve let them know you’re in very capable hands.”

“What?” Evie turned to look at me with confusion. “How—”

“Before our wedding,” I told her. “I couldn’t exactly marry you without their permission, could I?”

Slowly, Evie’s lips curled into a smile.

“You really did think of everything, didn’t you?”

“I’m a traditionalist,” I reminded her. “They seemed excited. But I’m sure they’ll be even happier if you check in now.”

“But shouldn’t I...” Evie bounced the phone on her lap and bit her lip.

“Something wrong?”

“I think I might need one more memory, Luke.” Evie’s smile was tentative this time, but it still managed to light up her entire face. “I’ll call them after. But first...”

“Anything, love.”

“Show me our wedding? I did promise that I’d let you show me, after our big chess match.”

I met her smile with one of my own. Warm. Excited.

Triumphant.

“Thought you’d never ask,” I told her.

Then, there in the fountain, I kissed her again.

EVIE**Somewhere In A Memory...**

As I stood there in front of the Bellagio's fountain, I couldn't decide what I was the most pissed off about.

There was Adam, which was a worthy focal point for my anger if I'd ever known one. He'd lured me here to Vegas with an overpriced engagement ring. He'd distracted me with a girls' night so he could do whatever he wanted the evening before our wedding.

Then, he'd had an orgy with what looked like half the exotic dancers on The Strip—male, female, and otherwise.

Yes, I was angry at Adam. But my phone was sinking into the waters of the fountain in front of me, so he couldn't call me.

Our wedding was off, so he'd never have control over me ever again.

As soon as I figured out what to do with the diamond ring currently cutting into my palm as I clenched my hand into a fist around it, everything about Adam would be gone from my life for good.

I was angry at myself, too. Once upon a time, I'd believed in true love. I'd believed in passion. In wonder. In grand gestures, in big, beautiful surprises. I'd believed in poetry, in sex, in *something*—and Adam had

never been any of that. Even before I'd learned about the cheating—and who even knew how many other times he'd strayed before tonight.

I'd almost settled for a lifetime with a man just because he'd been... *around*.

My fist clenched around my engagement ring even tighter. The sharp edges of the ring hurt my skin, but nothing hurt quite as badly as the knowledge of how much I'd almost let myself down.

And most of all, maybe, I was angry at Catholic school.

From first grade through senior year, I'd been taught that angels were benevolent beings who would never hurt anyone, and demons were horrible creatures who brought evil into the world.

If I'd learned anything today, it was how wrong Sister Mary Martha had truly been on that front.

"Love?"

I tore my gaze away from the fountain to look down at Luke.

He was on one knee in front of me. His hand was on my hip, possessive but gentle.

In his other hand, he was holding a little black velvet box with a huge black diamond glittering up from it.

"I can ask again," Luke offered. "But I have a feeling you heard me the first time."

Oh, yeah. I was definitely the most pissed at my Catholic schoolgirl learnings at this point.

Angels were out to kill me—and the very devil who was supposed to tempt me away from salvation and drag me to Hell had just offered me the opportunity to rule over instead as its queen.

As *his* queen.

"Sorry." I licked my lips and glanced at the girls. Bea was nodding at me like if I didn't take Luke up on his offer, she'd shove me into the fountain and take my place. Joan was giving me two sturdy thumbs-up. And even Ava, usually the voice of reason, offered me an encouraging smile. "I was just, um..."

"Seething," Luke said.

"Considering your generous offer, actually."

Luke laughed. "No, darling girl. You're furious. I can see it in your eyes."

"You can?" *Shit*. Nothing got past Luke, apparently.

“It’s a good look for you.” Luke tilted the ring back and forth, so it caught the lights of the fountain. The black diamond in its center was *huge*. Bigger than the white one that Adam had given me, even.

Not that size mattered.

Although, in Luke’s case...

“Go over it again for me,” I asked him. “Just so I know that I understand.”

“It’s simple, really.” Luke moved his hand from my hip so he could hold onto my fingers. “I want you to marry me, Evelyn St. John. Become my bride, rule over Hell with me for all of eternity, and be protected from those smug angelic bastards forever. For good.”

“That’s...one hell of a proposal,” I admitted.

“Yes,” Luke said with a smirk. “Well, you can imagine why.”

“But...” My anger was shifting into something else now. Something worse. *Nerves*. “I only just met you tonight, Luke. It’s a little fast, don’t you think?”

“I like fast.” Luke winked at me and my pussy fucking *quivered*. At just that. Just a wink. “You might find that you do, too, if you give it a chance.”

“Yes, Luke, you’re very handsome and very sexy.” As if it needed saying. Every time I was within a few feet of him, my body screamed at me to mount and ride him like a wild stallion. “And probably very good in bed, too.”

“And I think you probably come like a fucking dream, love.” Luke’s teeth caught his lower lip. He released it sinfully slowly, and I couldn’t help but imagine how it would feel to have those teeth on my neck instead. “Marry me and let’s find out for sure.”

“I don’t love you, Luke,” I blurted out. It was my last defense—the last shred of an argument I had against doing what I was almost certain had to be a very stupid thing. “You know that, don’t you?”

“You’ve loved me before,” he said. His gaze was suddenly very serious, like a gun being pulled in the midst of a knife fight. “Give me a chance, and I know you’ll love me again.”

I took a breath. “And you...you genuinely think you love *me*?”

“I have,” Luke assured me. “And I do. Since the beginning of time, and until time itself is done.”

My mouth fell open slightly.

I'd been right.

This *was* one hell of a proposal.

I took a deep breath and stared at the ring again.

I was crazy for even entertaining this.

When I reached for the ring, I knew it was the most certifiably insane thing I'd ever done.

But Luke pulled it away before I could take the ring out of its box. He reached into his pocket and handed me his phone instead.

"Call your parents first," he told me.

"What? Why?"

"So I can ask them for their permission, of course," Luke said, like it was the most normal thing in the entire world.

"You can't be serious." Just a second ago, I'd been the greatest love of his life for all of time eternal—and now he needed to have a chat with my mom and dad before we tied to knot? "Isn't that a little...old-fashioned?"

"Yes," Luke admitted. "But family is important to me. The kind you're born into..." He pressed his phone into my hand. "And the kind you choose, too."

Tentatively, I dialed my mother's number. It was late here in Vegas, and I knew it would be even later at home.

They didn't even know I was here—let alone that I was moments away from getting married.

For a second, I wasn't sure they were going to answer at all.

But then, I heard my mother's voice on the other line.

"Hello?" She sounded tired and groggy. I'd definitely woken her up. "Who is this?"

"It's Evie, Mom. I'm calling from...um, another phone."

"Evie, sweetie! How are you? Is everything okay?"

"It is," I told her. "But...um, would you mind if we did a video call?"

I held the screen an arm's length away and pressed the button to switch to video. The screen lit up and a second later, my mother's and father's faces appeared on it.

Mom was in her curlers and nighttime face mask. Dad squinted at the bright light of the screen as he pulled on his eyeglasses, his hair pointing in about twelve different directions.

"Evie, if you're in trouble..." Dad's voice rumbled out, croaky and tense.

“Not trouble,” I said. “I promise. There’s just something I need to ask you. Or...not me, I guess.”

“What time is it in LA, hon? It’s so late here...goodness.” My mother’s face got closer to the screen as she checked the time on her phone. “It’s technically early.”

“I’m not in LA right now, Mom. I’m...” I sighed. This was gonna be awkward. “I’m in Vegas. I’m... I might be getting married.”

“To *Adam*?” My mother’s voice shot up an octave as my father thumped his fist down on the duvet.

“Kiddo, you get to the airport and book a flight home this instant.” My father smacked the back of one hand against the palm of his other. “And you tell that boyfriend of yours I’ve got an ass whoopin’ with his name on it the next time I see him, so help me God—”

“What kind of man does he think he is, Evie? Marrying you without even *inviting* us... Hmpf! Just makes me wanna—”

My mother glanced at the Precious Moments figurine on her nightstand like she wanted to throw it against the wall—and my dad looked like he was about to hand it to her.

“It’s not Adam,” I told them. “Please don’t break anything, Mom.”

“Oh, pff!” Mom rolled her eyes. “I’m not gonna—”

“This is a time for breaking things, Evie,” Dad insisted. “Like how I’m gonna fly out to Vegas and break that no-good son-of-a-bitch’s nose—”

“I didn’t want to say anything earlier, hon, but—well, I am just about to my wit’s end with holding my tongue!” Mom nodded in indignant agreement with herself. “That Adam... he’s no good for you, Evie. He’s not even good looking, hon! Think of our grandchildren! And, sweetheart, he’s been on so many business trips lately—how do you know that he’s been faithful to you?”

“Mom...” I glanced at Luke, exhausted, but he merely smirked.

She had no idea how right she really was.

“I never liked him.” Dad crossed his arms over his chest. “He’s a loser, and a lazy trust fund bum—”

“Never done an honest day’s work in his life,” Mom joined in.

“And those suits he wears—Evie, baby, they’re not even *cut* right! What kinda man—”

“Guys.” I caught Luke’s eyes again and couldn’t help but laugh.

I guessed if Luke was going to be my husband, this was as good of an introduction as any other.

“Evie, you just tell us *one* good reason why you should marry that boy and—”

“And *then* I’ll break his nose,” Dad cut in.

“Guys.” I placed my hand over my face to control my laughter. “There’s someone I want you to meet. Please?”

I moved over to stand in front of Luke and shifted the phone to get him into the shot.

Immediately, both of my parents’ jaws dropped.

“Oh, *my*.” Mom blinked several times, then pressed her fingertips to her chest. She giggled, then grabbed a pillow to hide her face behind. “What a...a handsome devil! Oh, Lord... Evie, turn the video off, I don’t even have my face on—”

“Well, now, *there’s* a man.” My father nodded his head with approval. “Say, son, how would *you* feel about breaking—”

“No one’s nose is getting broken, Dad.” I laughed as Mom shoved the phone into Dad’s hands. She was frantically taking out her curlers while she tried to conceal her face from the frame. “And, Mom, you’re fine, he doesn’t care what you look like.”

“I care what I look like!”

“You’re beautiful, Mrs. St. John. Your daughter obviously takes after you.” Luke’s voice was smooth and suave—so charming that my mother giggled like a schoolgirl at the compliment. “And, Mr. St. John, you look *very* capable of breaking as many noses as you please.”

“Now, *that’s* the kind of man you should be marrying, babygirl,” Dad said with a firm nod.

Luke and I glanced at each other. Light was dancing in his eyes, and his smile was too infectious not to mirror.

“Actually...” I began.

“That’s what I’d like to ask you both about,” Luke took over.

“Oh?” My parents exchanged a look as my mother lowered the pillow away from her face.

“You see, I’m very taken with your daughter. She makes me smile. She makes me laugh. She drives me...” Luke shook his head and laughed. “Perfectly insane, and I’m afraid I’m...madly, furiously in love with her.

With your permission, I'd like to make her my wife. Tonight, if at all possible."

My parents' eyes narrowed as they exchanged another glance.

"How long have you two known each other?" my mother asked. In an instant, she might as well have swapped out her curlers for a Sherlock Holmes hat and a magnifying glass. "We've never met you before, Mr.—"

"Dawnstar," Luke supplied. "Luke, if you don't mind, ma'am."

"Ooh." Mom waved her hand by her face like she needed air. "*Ma'am*. Oh, I like how you said that."

I almost rolled my eyes.

Less than five minutes, and Luke had already completely charmed my mom.

But we weren't out of the woods yet.

"Well, I know it's short notice," I admitted. "We've only known each other for—"

"For a very long time," Luke finished for me. I guessed if everything else Luke had told me was real, it was technically the truth.

"You know, Evie, your mother and I eloped." Dad grabbed Mom's hand and squeezed it passionately.

"Maybe history has a way of repeating itself." Mom looked over at Dad, completely lovesick and googly-eyed all over again.

I had to laugh.

Twenty-five years, and they hadn't changed a bit.

"Yes," Luke agreed. He gave me the same sort of lovesick glance—although, it was so much darker coming from his eyes. "I think history really does."

"Well, of course we support this, hon," Mom said enthusiastically.

"You two remind me of the two of us when we were your age." My father nodded several times. "As long as Evie wants this, I don't see any reason to deny her."

"Actually..." Luke turned his smile my way. "I'm still waiting on her answer."

My parents leaned in toward the camera. Behind me, I could practically hear the girls all holding their breath too.

My heart was racing—but for once, I didn't think it was from fear.

Luke was a good man—even if he did have one devil of a reputation.

He'd charmed my parents in an instant, succeeding where Adam had failed for years and years.

He'd saved me tonight.

He made me smile and made me laugh and drove me insane too.

"Yes," I said softly, and then again, a little more loudly. "Yes, Luke. I'll marry you."

"You'll be mine?" Luke almost sounded surprised.

"I'll be yours," I said with a nod.

"Tonight?"

"Tonight."

Luke smiled gently and raised an eyebrow. "For the rest of our lives?"

I bit my lip and nodded again.

I'd been willing to marry Adam, after all—and Luke was ten times the man.

Plus, probably a thousand times better looking as well.

I let Adam's engagement ring fall to the ground at my feet. Maybe someone who needed it would find it there.

I certainly didn't anymore.

"Yes, Luke," I told him with a smile. "I'll marry you. For the rest of our lives."

AND TEN MINUTES later in a twenty-four-hour chapel...

I did.

I really did.

"Evelyn St. John." Luke smiled down at me as he held my hands in his. "I vow to love you, even in the face of my own flaws."

"Of which I'm sure there are many." I let my eyes sparkle as I smiled up at him.

"You'll soon find out." Luke squeezed my hands. "I vow to be faithful to you, even in the face of temptation."

"And do you find yourself tempted often, Luke?"

"Only when I'm near you, love. But then..." Luke gave me a flash of his teeth. "Constantly. And I vow to protect you with my body, even should it cost me my life."

"Can you even die?" I asked.

"Let's hope we never have to find out." Luke reached into his pocket and pulled out the little black velvet box that held my ring. "I vow to obey

you—” Luke’s eyes glimmered. “—even when I don’t want to. I vow it before the Almighty Himself—from this breath, to my last.”

Luke took the ring out and handed the box to Lock, who stood at Luke’s side.

On the other side of the chapel, as Luke slipped the ring on my finger, Bea’s hands were clasped together. Joan let out a wolf whistle, and Ava sighed romantically.

But I...

I was at a loss.

“I didn’t prepare any vows, Luke,” I admitted with a laugh.

“Just speak from your heart, then,” Luke suggested. He twisted the ring on my finger, like he was making sure both were truly real. “Something will come.”

“Luke Dawnstar.” *Lucifer. Light-bringer. World-breaker. Adversary. Satan. The Devil.* “I vow...” I bit my lip and closed my eyes.

My vows to Adam had come prewritten. I was only supposed to repeat what the officiant told me to say.

But with Luke...

Well, he did have a way of forcing me to go off-script.

“I vow to understand you,” I found myself saying. “Or at least, to try. You’re not going to be a mystery to me, Luke. I’m going to figure you out—your cryptic metaphors and all.”

“Historically speaking, you’re quite good at that,” Luke assured me.

“Yeah.” I closed my eyes as I laughed. “Just like that. And...and I vow to be faithful to you. Looking the way you do...that shouldn’t be hard.”

“There’s only one thing that should be hard in this relationship, love,” Luke said with a quick, suggestive raise of his brows. “And it should leave you too sore to even think of other men.”

“You’re impossible.” I groaned through my laughter and shook my head. “I vow to put up with that.”

“And I’ll love you all the more for it.”

“I vow...to honor you.” The meaning of that one had always sort of escaped me in other weddings I’d sat through, but with Luke... it felt right. “I vow to be grateful for everything you give me. I won’t take you for granted. I’ll...behave.”

Luke stared at me for a moment, then broke out into full-body laughter. “If there’s one thing I want from you, darling, it’s hardly

behaving.”

“How’s this, then?” I challenged him. “I vow to obey you too, Luke. Even when I don’t want to.”

“Even in bed?”

I rolled my eyes. “Yes, Luke. Especially then.”

Under her breath behind me, I heard Joan mutter to Bea, “this is the horniest fucking wedding...”

And she was probably right, too.

“Is that all, love?” Luke asked.

“Almost,” I said. “I...I can’t vow to love you, Luke. I’ve barely known you for long enough to promise you that in good faith.”

“I hope there’s a *but* coming soon, love.”

“There is,” I promised. “But I can vow to try. When I feel it—if I feel it—I won’t hold back. I’m sorry I can’t offer you more than that, but...it’s something, right?”

“More than something, love.” Luke moved his hands to my body and pulled me to him. “It’s everything.”

“I...I don’t have a ring for you,” I said, feeling a little embarrassed—but since this whole thing had been sprung on me under an hour ago, I could hardly imagine how I could have whipped one up under such short notice.

“Don’t worry.” Luke held up a hand, revealing a blackened gold ring already around his finger. “I’ve been holding onto this one for an occasion like this for a while.”

Slowly, we all turned to the wedding officiant, a man dressed like Elvis who’d been sweating in stunned silence this entire time.

To be fair, he probably didn’t know what to make of any of this.

Hell—I still wasn’t entirely sure that I did either.

“Uh...w-well...” The officiant glanced between Luke and me, then held up his hands like he was washing them of this strange, befuddling mess he’d been roped into. “You may now kiss the bride?”

Luke’s grin was more wicked than I’d ever seen it.

“Thank God,” he said as he grabbed my face and pulled me to him.

As his lips crushed against mine, I closed my eyes—but even then, I could’ve sworn that through my eyelids, I could see a golden light enveloping both of us. I could feel it, too. Warm. All-encompassing.

Full of hope and... somehow, full of love, too.

An everlasting kind.

EVIE

When I blinked my eyes open again, the golden light was gone... but Luke was still kissing me.

For a second—just one, or maybe three or four at most...

I kept my eyes closed and just enjoyed the way it felt.

Luke's fingers tangled in my hair, massaging my scalp at the roots. His lips burned—they always did—and his tongue slipped into my mouth greedily, like I was something delicious that he just couldn't help but taste.

I stood completely still through all of it.

For as long as Luke thought I was still lost in my memory, I could finally discover what he did with my poor, defenseless body while I was elsewhere—and everything he did, I liked.

His kiss was a hungry one. It was ravenous and possessive. His hands smoothed down my neck, then to my collarbones—then to my breasts. As he squeezed them, a dangerous growl left his throat.

"I know you're back, love." His lips curled into a smirk as he purred against my mouth. "Or would you rather I kept going?"

I let out a slow, shuddering breath as I opened my eyes.

"I ought to slap you," I breathed.

"Yes," Luke agreed. "You really ought to."

I raised my hands up...and rested them on his chest instead. Without my heels, I could tuck my head into the space just beneath his chin. A comfortable position. A safe place.

He'd vowed it always would be—before the Almighty himself.

"What was that golden light at the end there?" I rubbed my cheek against his clavicle as he wrapped me up in his arms. "It felt...sacred. Holy, even."

"A sign, I think." Luke turned his face to the side and rubbed his own cheek against my crown. "Someone watching the wedding must have approved."

"You think it was—" *God*, I wanted to say, but that was either sacrilegious, arrogant, or both.

"He works in mysterious ways, they say." Luke chuckled. "Best not to question it."

"Then I won't." Maybe some things were best left unanswered. If the Almighty had smiled down on the Devil's own wedding...

Somewhere in Vermont that night, Sister Mary Martha's favorite knuckle-rapping ruler must have spontaneously snapped in half.

"You remember, then?" Luke took my face in his hands as he pulled away. "The call...the vows...the kiss. Everything?"

"Almost." I rolled my shoulders back, searching for that little ache the scratch marks had left on them. They'd healed over nicely now, but if I tried, I could still feel it, just barely. "I'm only missing what happened when we got up to your suite last night."

"Mm." Luke ran his thumb across my lower lip. "I can make you remember that too, if you want. It will require a much lower kiss—though, no less holy."

"I think..." *I think I want you to tear my clothes off and ravish me all over again. I think I want you to get on your knees so I can see how the Devil worships. I think I want you to found a whole new religion between my thighs.* I didn't pause to think. I knew exactly what I was thinking. I was thinking a lot of things in that moment—none of them holy, and certainly none of them chaste. "Maybe a redo would be better."

"I think..." Luke's eyes met mine, and in an instant I knew his mind was just as deeply in the gutter as mine was. "That can be arranged."

WE LEFT the girls with Mal and Lock. They seemed happy about it—or at least, Ava and Joan did.

Poor Bea. It almost didn't seem fair to make her keep playing third wheel to Ava's shy glances at Mal and Joan's strange flirtation with Lock.

But Bea had always managed to look out for herself, and for the moment, I had other things on my mind.

I remembered meeting my husband now.

I remembered why I'd married him.

I remembered our vows, the rings, the kiss...

And though I didn't remember our wedding night, I desperately needed to make a memory of a new one.

Luke pulled me by the hand into the suite. I stumbled after him, still a little damp from my adventures in the Bellagio's fountain and more than a little soaked between my thighs.

He caught me.

He always did.

And this time, as his arms encircled my body and I found myself cocooned in his perfect heat, he caught me with a kiss.

Luke's lips captured mine. They moved in silent prayers more holy than any rosary could ever contain.

When he pulled away, his pale eyes were dark with sin.

"Oh," I breathed. That look in his eyes said that now that I was truly his—now that there was no room to deny it—he would show me no mercy.

And for once, I didn't want mercy from him.

Everything I wanted was currently pressed, hard and thick, against me as he swept me off my feet.

"Oh." Luke smirked as he mimicked my sound of desire. His voice was almost cruel—but it was a cruelty so sensual and enticing that I nearly found myself begging to feel his cruelty again. "You have no idea what you've just gotten yourself into, love."

He held me against him for a moment as he let the sensation of being conquered sink in. My feet dangled off the floor, like a ballerina's suspended mid-jump. My eyes caught the painting of Ajax and Cassandra on Luke's wall—Ajax, strong and dominating, Cassandra reaching for the heavens over his shoulder as he triumphantly marched her away.

I would be no Cassandra for Luke this time.

Not tonight.

My high heels dropped to the floor from my feet as I wrapped my legs around his waist.

"For once, I know exactly what I've gotten myself into, *love*." I stole the next kiss with Luke's same sensual cruelty. I took his lower lip

between my teeth and relished the way he growled back at me as I bit into his flesh.

Our chests rose and fell with subtle violence. My fingers tangled into his hair, then tugged.

“You fierce little slut.” I couldn’t tell if Luke was snarling or laughing as he carried me to the tall, floor-to-ceiling windows that covered the far wall. “My equal, if I’ve ever had one—and *mine*. Only mine.”

Luke pressed my back against the window and cuffed my wrists with his hands. He spread my arms wide, Christ-like, as he moved his mouth to my neck, then my cleavage. Luke buried his face between the mounds of my breasts, licking and sucking and biting like the beast I’d always suspected he’d been hiding beneath that charming gentleman’s smirk of his.

Desire slammed through my body. My lips curled back, baring my teeth. I tried to tear my wrists from his grasp, but he only held tighter as a black laugh left his throat.

“Oh, no, Evie. You asked for this.” He pulled my arms up above my head and shifted his hands so he held both of my wrists in one fist. “Now, you’re going to fucking have it.”

I was helpless to him, and he knew it. He took advantage of it—and I couldn’t stop him.

I didn’t *want* him to stop.

His hips worked against mine, grinding with promise. His cock was stiff and relentless. It strained against his slacks as he forced it flush with the thin lace of my panties. One wrong move—or one right one—and his cock would tear straight through both to claim my cunt. I had no doubt.

“Your body is mine, Evie.” Luke’s teeth dragged across my collarbone and sank into the fabric of my dress. With his free hand, he took the other side of it. It split down the middle and my breasts spilled out of it with a single, violent tug. “Your tits are mine—” He pulled his lips across them like he was marking them as proof. “Your mouth is mine—” He crushed my lips beneath his, hard enough to bruise. When he pulled away, he was panting. Hungry and unhinged. “Your soul is mine, and your heart—”

“No,” I growled back at him. “Not that.”

“Not yet.” His lips tore across mine, another sinful kiss, then he laughed, low and cold. “Tell me that again when I’m done with you and I might actually believe it.”

I swallowed as something shot through me—fear?

Maybe.

Maybe I was afraid.

But if it was fear I felt in that moment, I'd sell Luke my soul a second time just to feel it again.

He ripped my dress further. My bra was just another obstacle that he seemed to take pleasure in defeating. He tore it down, away from my tits, and took one of my breasts into his hands so he could lick and suck and bite at my nipple as well.

"Fucking ambrosia." He captured my nipple between his teeth, sucked hard and let it loose again with a little *pop* that panged and echoed all the way down to my core. "Sweeter than any apple I've ever known."

He did the same to the other, then finally released my wrists. My hands scrambled to hold him. I ran my fingers, nails poised, across his stubble and through his hair.

The dark power radiating off of Luke told me I'd be marked and bruised by the time he was finished.

And I'd be damned if I was the only one.

"Is this what you wanted, Evie?" He took what was left of my dress in his hands and pulled both sides taut. "Was this what you had in mind?"

"Something like this." I wound my fingers brutally through his hair and kissed him again. My hair was a wet, tangled mess and my skin was covered in goosebumps, but I wasn't cold.

Between the heat of Luke's body and the flames of Hell itself burning in the fireplace, I wasn't sure that I'd ever be cold again.

"What else were you imagining, love?" Luke nipped at my neck and I gasped.

This time, I was the one who got the last laugh.

I tugged on his hair to pull his teeth away from my neck.

"I imagined we'd be wearing far fewer clothes than this by now," I purred against his ear. I took his lobe between my teeth and bit him. "But maybe the Devil only has the heart to half-ruin a dress."

"Oh, darling," Luke growled back at me. He rose to the challenge like we were fiddler players at a crossroads at midnight. "This dress was doomed from the moment you put it on."

He barely had to flex his arms before the dress split in two—and he didn't stop there. He ripped it at each arm, then tore my bra apart at its

center with a strength I could hardly comprehend.

They all wafted to the floor as our lips met again.

Was this a dangerous game I was playing, daring the Devil himself to ravish me?

Of course it was.

But it was the only game in town.

My panties, he nearly ripped apart as well. His fingers curled beneath the lace, ready to destroy—but as he tore himself from our kiss, a devious light was in his eyes and a sinister smile on his lips.

“No.” He took my hips in his hands and slammed them against the window. If the glass shattered, I knew I’d fall—but Luke knew something about falling.

If I fell, then I’d take him down with me.

He pulled his hips back from mine, forcing my legs to release their hold around his waist. Once again, I was suspended in the air. My body slid against the glass behind me as Luke lowered me to the floor.

“No?” I bit my lip and released it slowly as I gazed up at him. “You haven’t lost your daring, have you, Luke?”

“You’re the one daring me, love.” He cupped my jaw in his hand and pressed my cheek to his as he whispered in my ear. “So, no. I’m not going to tear those little lace panties from your delectable cunt.”

“No?”

“No,” Luke said again. “You’re going to turn around, bend over, and take them off for me while you beg me to pound up into you so hard and so rough that you scream.”

My breath caught in my throat. “And what will I be screaming, Luke?”

“My name, love.” Luke crushed a kiss to my cheek. “What else?”

“And you’re going to make me?”

“I am,” he hissed. “Either by my order, or you can do it yourself.”

I found my breath somewhere in the pit of my stomach.

Just a moment ago, I’d accused Luke of losing his daring.

I certainly wasn’t about to lose mine.

“By your order, then.” I locked my gaze on his and formed every syllable in perfect, aching enunciation with my lips. “Make me, Luke.”

“God,” Luke breathed. His eyes widened for just a second like he was in awe of what I’d become. “How I hoped you’d ask.”

Luke tore the top buttons away from his shirt as he pressed his hand to my throat. He leaned in so close as he spoke, his lips brushed against mine.

“Turn around,” he said, and his words compelled me.

I eased my neck from his grasp and slowly, I turned to face the window. I looked over my shoulder at him as my body flooded with the thrumming sensation of power—not just mine, and not just his, but something that we shared.

Something all our own.

“And then?” I whispered.

“Bend over.” He ripped the rest of the buttons from his shirt. They pinged and bounced as they scattered to the ground and hit the hard wood of the floor. “Now.”

I could feel every drop of blood coursing through my veins. Every heartbeat pumping it through them, too.

I spread my legs slightly and pressed my hands to the window as I lowered myself into a bow. I caught sight of my reflection as I did it and had to pause so I could stare.

My hair was wild and tangled like it had never known a brush. I was so certain that it had been a wet, matted mess from the fountain when we got back to the Inferno, but now, it curled and swelled around my face like waves of an unforgiving golden ocean. My lips were swollen from Luke’s kisses. My cheeks were flushed and my eyes were sharper. Full of something I didn’t have a name for yet.

We’d have to invent one after this—and I had no doubt that we would.

“Yes, Evie. You’re very fucking pretty.” The coldness in Luke’s voice was almost playful in its teasing. “But I told you to bend over.” In the reflection, I saw him toss his shirt to the floor. He pressed his hand against the base of my spine, heavy and bold. “All the way—and push that lovely ass of yours out.”

I had to obey—and in that obedience, I found something inside myself so deliciously dark that if I’d been a sane woman in that moment, I would have feared becoming addicted to it.

But I was not a sane woman.

Not when Luke was involved.

Not anymore.

I bent lower and pushed my ass up for him. I couldn't see my reflection anymore, but I could imagine how I must have looked.

Every awful name I'd ever been called by a man—that was how I looked now. *Bitch. Slut. Whore.*

But for Luke, those weren't insults.

Here in his domain, they were honors—and I took them all inside me, one by one, with pride.

My pussy was so hot, I wouldn't have been surprised to find it was glowing. Luke ran a hand over my ass, then gave it a smart, sharp smack that only made me burn even hotter.

"Get them off." There was urgency in his voice. I heard his belt clank as he released it. His zipper was a whisper, then his slacks fell to the floor. "Now."

I didn't need to ask what he was referring to.

My body knew it the same way it knew starlight from sun.

I hooked my fingers beneath the lace and slipped my panties down off my hips. I could feel his eyes on me every second I revealed myself to him. I basked in the dark glow of his attention. My cunt throbbed, and radiated white-hot heat.

He let me get them all the way down to my knees before he lost control and ripped them off anyway.

"Beg me, Evie." My clit was swollen, aching and desperate to be touched. "Beg me to fucking ravish you like the goddess you are."

There. That was it.

Not a bitch. Not a slut. Not a whore.

A goddess.

In that word—in that moment—he would have had me even without the power of our vows.

"Do it." My breaths came short and quick, but deep. "Take me. Fuck me. Ravish me." I licked my lips, closed my eyes, and reached back to spread myself for him. "Make me yours."

"Oh, *fuck me*," Luke swore.

Then he was on me, cock shoved against my entrance, one hand clawing into my breast and the other curling around my neck.

Ecstasy. I was so soaked, my cunt was just short of dripping for him. As rough as he wanted me, I was too slick for it. His cock slipped through my folds and impaled me, right to my core. I cried out without thinking.

The sound that left my throat was unlike any I'd ever made before. High and loud—not a scream, but something so much more feral.

Luke was unhinged, and so was I.

His hips rocked against mine, hard and fast. His cock pounded into me like every second it wasn't buried, balls-deep inside me, brought him pain. The hand on my neck moved upward, tilting my head back as far as it would go.

My back arched in a way I knew it would have never tolerated before Luke—and it did it with such ease, I didn't know I was entirely human any longer.

With Luke, I was something so much more.

He moved his hand from my breast to my hair, winding it around his fist like rope. He stole a hundred kisses from my lips—a thousand—more. Every thrust from his cock rang out like unholy church bells inside my body. They reverberated beneath my skin, peeling and clanging and trembling, loud and clear.

An explosion was stirring between us. My cunt throbbed around his thickness. My muscles flexed and rippled, threatening to tear themselves apart.

And through it all, every moment that his tongue wasn't in my mouth and his teeth weren't on my neck, he growled the same word at me.

"Mine. Mine. Mine."

Something broke inside me, furious and elated. A rapture of bliss. I don't know how I did it, but I threw him off me—

And in an instant, we were on the floor. I placed my hand over his throat and mounted him. My hips moved just as roughly against his, and my lips claimed kisses just as relentless and harsh, but this time, I was on top.

The explosion hit us both with perfect symmetry. It burst and curled and caught flame between us, inside us, around us—all-consuming, wild and free and only ours.

It was so intense, I needed something to hold onto just to keep myself from falling apart. I took his shoulders into my hands and dug my nails into his skin with desperation. His own fingers pressed into my hips, guiding me down and ensuring I wouldn't stop until we were both completely done.

Luke's cum rushed up into me and my cunt spasmed in return, squeezing every last drop up into my core. I couldn't catch my breath as I felt it shooting into me—instead, I gasped. I moaned. I screamed.

I screamed his name.

"Luke!" It was a wail that seemed to shake the very fabric of reality around us. A call—

Then, a response.

"Evie." He growled my name into my neck and sank his teeth into my skin.

It hurt. Of course it hurt.

It hurt better than anything I'd ever felt.

I gasped and purred and wailed even louder—wordlessly at first, then, from the chaos we'd created...

"I love you." I had to rush the words out between ragged gulps of air. "I love you. I love you."

I didn't know how many times I said it.

Just enough to damn me, I was sure.

But in that moment, there wasn't anything I wanted more than to be damned.

If I was going to be damned, then I'd be best damned exactly there, exactly like that, exactly with him.

In the wake of it all, I lost track of myself. I didn't know what I was feeling.

I didn't even know if I existed anymore.

But no matter what happened, I didn't lose track of him.

"I love you," he breathed back at me.

His hands moved, and if I was still real, they were moving over my body. His mouth rained kisses, and if I still existed, every one of them fell on my skin.

"I love you," he said again. "I love you too."

Reality came rushing back to me as I collapsed on top of him. He wrapped me up in an embrace so firm, I knew my body must have still been whole. His lips moved to my cheeks, kissing away tears I didn't realize I'd cried. His fingers smoothed my hair away from my face and his scent folded around me like a warm blanket on a cold night. Sweat and sex and victory, all mixed together like the sweetest perfume I'd ever known.

“You love me, gorgeous girl.” Luke’s voice was in my ear. His breath curled with joy against my cheek. “You really do.”

I regained just enough sense of myself to laugh at that.

“You can’t take the things that burst out of my mouth when you make me come like that seriously, Luke.” I turned my head to the side for another taste of him. Another kiss.

“Maybe not,” Luke allowed. “Are you saying you didn’t mean it?”

“I don’t know.” I laughed again, completely dazed. “I don’t know anything anymore.”

“Mm. Poor thing. Fucked so hard you’ve lost your mind.” Luke laughed with me, then rolled his body over mine. “But even if I can only hear those words from your pretty lips during brain-shattering orgasms...” He was inside me still, I realized. And incredibly—*impossibly*—still hard. He kissed me, eyes glimmering with triumph as he pulled away. “I’d very much like to hear it some more.”

His hips moved slowly, easing us into it.

And then, just like that—

We were at it all over again.

EVIE

Luke reclined on one of the velvet lounges by the fire, naked except for his white tuxedo shirt. It was unbuttoned. Through the gap in it, his chest glowed in the firelight.

One of Luke's muscular legs was stretched out to its full length. The other was bent to prop up the book that rested in his lap.

He didn't look like the Devil when he was like this, all serene and relaxed, reading by the fire.

He was gorgeous. He looked every bit the angel he had been before he fell.

And somehow, he was mine.

"What are you reading?"

I came out of the shower wrapped in a fluffy white robe and matching slippers. My skin was still humid from the shower's heat. I had my hair piled on top of my head in a wild, messy bun. A tendril fell down from it, framing my face as I sat on an ottoman in front of Luke's lounge.

"Vampire novel." Luke looked up from his pages and reached out to tease the hem of my robe away from my knee. "It's quite good."

"Vampires?" I couldn't quite see the cover of the book, but knowing Luke's taste in literature, it was probably either Stoker or Le Fanu. "*Dracula* or *Carmilla*?"

"Neither." Luke flashed me the cover. It showed a shiny apple held between two pale hands against a black backdrop.

“*Twilight*?” I covered my mouth so he couldn’t see me laughing at him—but despite my best efforts, I knew he heard it. “You can’t be serious.”

“Why wouldn’t I be?” Luke turned the book over in his hand so he could study the cover for himself. “It’s far from perfect, but—”

“Eternal sparkling vampire stalker seduces teenage girl he desperately wants to eat...” I snorted. “Luke... Surely you don’t actually *identify* with Edward Cul—*aah!*”

I giggled as Luke dove for the tie of my robe. He grasped it firmly and tugged me toward him with it. My body fell onto his on the lounge and Luke wrapped me up in his arms, grinning.

“Never said the characters were perfect, love.” His voice rumbled beneath me, low and warm. “But I’ve always liked that in a book.”

“Is that what you think you are, Luke? A flawed character?”

“Oh, darling. I’m a proper bastard. An absolute scoundrel, too.” With a growl, he rolled my body over, pinning me down beneath him. “A very wicked man, or so they tell me.”

“Is that what I’m feeling between my thighs? Wickedness?” I shifted my hand down between my legs and found Luke’s cock, rock hard and deliciously hot. It throbbed gorgeously as I wrapped my fingers around its base.

“Something like that,” Luke purred.

“Mm. You’re insatiable, Luke.”

“For you, love?” Luke moaned softly and tilted his head back, eyes closed with pleasure. “Always.”

“And here I am, still sore from earlier.” I wasn’t sure that my pussy was ever going to stop aching. Not with Luke around.

“There’s no rest for the wicked,” Luke murmured as I stroked his cock gently. “Especially not if you keep that up.”

“What about the wives of the wicked?” I tightened my grip on Luke’s cock and gave it another long, slow pump. “Do they get to rest?”

“Mm. I love how that sounds on your lips,” Luke purred.

“What?” I laughed. “Rest? You don’t seem worn out to me—at least, not yet.”

“No, love. *Wife*.” Luke smirked, then dipped down to nip at my neck. “I don’t think I’ll ever get tired of hearing that.”

“Even if I’ve agreed to it a thousand times before?”

“Yes, Evie.” Luke pressed a kiss against the place he’d just bitten. “Especially then.”

We stayed silent for a little while, just touching each other. I’d never done anything like this with Adam—or with anyone, for that matter.

It was strangely cozy, spending time with someone like this. Adam had always bounced between bed, table, shower and the office like he’d been made of clockwork on the insides.

But Luke...

Luke luxuriated. Even when he did have somewhere to go.

“Tell me about them, then,” I said as Luke pressed my wrist to his lips.

“About what, love?”

“The other times. Other lives.” It was wild to even imagine that I’d been reincarnated over and over again since the beginning of humanity—but I supposed at least Sister Mary Martha would be happy to know that her most hated theory—that of human evolution—wasn’t true after all.

And it did make sense, in a way.

I’d always felt like an old soul.

“Which one do you want to hear about?” Luke asked. “There have been so many. We’d spend another lifetime right here on this lounge if I tried to recount them all.”

“That doesn’t sound so bad,” I said, and Luke smiled.

“Highlight reel, then?” he suggested.

I nodded and held my breath.

Normally, this kind of thing was Ava’s style, not mine. She was the one with the interest in dream interpretation and telling fortunes in tea leaves, not me. We’d even bought her a past life reading for her birthday last year, though she’d hated her results so much she wouldn’t tell any of us what the psychic had said.

Now that I was having to face the truth of my own unfortunate existence, though...

I wished I could still call myself a skeptic, but I couldn’t pretend I wasn’t curious.

“Well, there were the Crusades...” Luke marched his fingers down my side. “Those were some tragic, torrid times for you and me.”

“Which Crusades?” I asked. “There were dozens of them.”

“Evie...” Luke shook his head slowly. “All of them. From 1095 until well into the 1400s, I lost you over and over again.”

“Which side were we on?” There had been a little flashback during sex earlier that must have been from that era. Horses, armor, and a sky filled with arrows. *Oh, my.*

“We were on our side, love. The humans and whoever they thought they were fighting were just pawns in the angels’ bid to take you from me.”

“But Jerusalem...”

“Was just the explanation the humans came up with to justify the dreams of bloodshed the angels had put in their minds. Heaven would have humanity believe that every battle is between good and evil, but...no. It never was.”

“What *is* it about, then?” I asked, thinking of my father. My grandfather. The wars they’d fought, so certain that they were on the side of right, and the friends they’d lost because of it. “Surely all of that killing wasn’t for nothing.”

“I do love humanity, Evie, but without full free will...your fellow man is a fickle race indeed.” Luke scoffed. “I don’t always know what they fight for. Sometimes, they’re right to do it. There are times when there’s no other way to liberate those who cannot liberate themselves.”

“What do you fight for, then?”

“For you, darling.” Luke stole a kiss. “And for all you humans. My comrades and I have always wanted to give humanity the right to choose the paths of their own lives. Maybe they’d be able to make better decisions for themselves if they could.”

“You’re saying free will doesn’t exist, then?” As Luke marched his fingers up my neck to my lips, I nipped his fingertips gently. “When I bite you, is it because Heaven ordained it?”

Luke chuckled. “Here in the Inferno, you have the freest will of anywhere, Evie.”

“Unless I try to leave,” I reminded Luke.

“Yes,” he agreed. His knuckles smoothed against the curve of my cheek. “I have to keep you safe somehow, don’t I? There’s a reason we always work obedience into our wedding vows.”

“Free will for everyone but me.” My temper grumbled a little at that. “That doesn’t seem fair.”

“Nor is life, darling.” Luke sighed. “This universe is an unkind one. The only bright point I’ve ever found in all its cruelty is you.”

“You know that you could have saved a lot of lives if you’d just let the angels have their way.” *Even if it meant letting them kill me.* I was still grappling with the guilt of all those who had died while Luke tried to protect me.

“Maybe,” Luke admitted. “But that would have meant I could never have you at all.”

“Maybe we just aren’t meant to be together,” I said tentatively.

“No,” Luke growled. “The universe is cruel, but...no. To give you to me only to deny you to me for the rest of eternity... I can’t believe it would be *that* cruel.”

“But if I always end up dead anyway...”

I didn’t even know if I agreed with the points I was making. This, here with Luke right now...it felt good.

Too good.

If it was a sin to be with him—and I was becoming more and more certain it was—then maybe we should have stayed sinless.

I didn’t like the idea, but then again, someone had to play Devil’s advocate here.

“Darling,” Luke said pointedly. “Have you ever heard the phrase, *We don’t negotiate with terrorists?*”

I laughed. “Only from every action hero who’s ever graced the silver screen.”

“Let me put it to you this way, then,” Luke offered. “I can’t say that I’ve been right to do everything I’ve done—but neither can they. If the angels truly cared about bloodshed and suffering, they could stop this just as easily as I could.”

“Why don’t they, then?” Unless they were really just the heartless bastards Luke claimed...

“I couldn’t tell you,” Luke admitted. “But as far as I’m concerned... people need the bad times, the hard ones, to know what joy feels like. What’s pleasure...” He teased my nipple between his fingers. “Without pain?”

I yelped, then let out a moan, as Luke’s teasing touch turned to a little pinch.

“Is that what you think this is all about?” I asked with a laugh. “Contrast?”

“You’re asking the same questions that every philosopher has,” Luke said. “What is light without darkness? What does love mean if you can’t choose it?” He sighed. “Honestly, Evie, I’m not the right person to debate this with. My will is set on the matter. I can’t lose you, no matter the cost. If these are the questions you need answered before you decide whether to stay or go, you should go back up to Limbo and argue with the long-beards at the bar.”

“What does God think, then?” I asked. Luke was right, I did need to figure this out, and soon. Before classes started up again, at the very least. But it was hard to do that when my entire concept of morality had been turned on its head this week. “Surely *He* has an opinion.”

Luke shrugged. “The Almighty is a mystery, love. Even to me.”

“The Devil doesn’t know the will of God?” I laughed. “That makes defying it a little difficult, I imagine.”

“I’ve never spoken to Him personally.” Another shrug. “I saw Him once.”

“Once?”

“I think.” Luke nodded slowly. His gaze became a little distant. “A bright, blinding light and...and an overwhelming feeling of love. Almost as good as how it feels when I’ve got my cock inside you, come to think.”

“Luke!” I might have been shackled up with the Devil, but even I knew *that* was sacrilegious.

“I think I saw it again, you know,” Luke mused. “When we said our vows. I could have sworn I felt it.”

I blinked, then nodded. “I...I think I felt it too.”

“Well, he can’t be all that opposed to us fucking, then.” Luke smirked. “He all but gave us the go-ahead.”

“What about...” I bit my lip. “Dare I even ask about Jesus?”

“Your Catholic schoolgirl is showing, darling.” Luke brushed my hair behind my ear. “If you want to put on your little plaid skirt and long socks, I’m not opposed, but—”

“Just answer, Luke. I’m curious.”

“Haven’t the faintest, love.”

“Didn’t you spend all that time in the desert trying to tempt him down your wicked path?”

Luke chuckled. “A good story—but no, that wasn’t me. I was a little busy at the time.”

“Doing *what*?” Maybe my Catholic schoolgirl bit was showing, but Luke was doing a lot of rewriting of my scriptures here.

“You’d just been reborn in the British Isles,” Luke explained. “They were under Roman occupation. If Christ really was killed by the Romans, I could hardly let them crucify you too.”

“Another past life.” My head reeled a little as I tried to imagine what Great Britain had even looked like at that time. “Is *that* where you picked up your accent?”

“Not at all. I ripped this one off of some British gangster show,” Luke admitted. “Besides, I was marching with Rome at the time, anyway.”

“You were marching with the people who were planning on killing me?”

“Friends close, enemies closer,” Luke quipped. “Have you ever heard of Boudicca?”

“I have, but...” I narrowed my eyes. Warrior queen of the Celts... I’d never even shot a gun before, let alone ridden a horse or carried a sword. Could that *really* have been me once? “Are you pulling my leg, Luke?”

“Would you like me to?” Luke reached down to tug at my calf experimentally. “Strange kink, but I’m happy to oblige...”

“Luke!”

“I’m not lying, Evie. Not to you.” Luke squeezed my calf, then patted it as he rose. “Father of Lies I may be...but I like to think I’m a husband of truth. As long as you’ve changed your mind about filing for divorce, at least.”

“I’m still deciding,” I admitted.

A life here in Hell with Luke meant abandoning my family, my job, my education, my friends...my entire life Above.

It wasn’t a choice I was about to make without careful consideration. Or—as I admired a flash of Luke’s firm, perfectly shaped ass beneath his shirt as he moved to his bookshelf—while Luke didn’t have pants on.

“Is there anything I could do to improve my odds?” Luke gestured at the bookshelf. “I do have a *considerable* number of very rare books here, might I remind you.”

I laughed. It was hard not to. I wouldn’t sell my soul easily, but for unlimited access to Luke’s personal library...the temptation didn’t escape me. “I don’t suppose you have a first edition of *Pride and Prejudice* on those shelves, do you?”

“Up here? No.” Luke ran his fingers across the spines of the books before him. “The title always felt a little too on the nose for me. The pride part, in particular. But if that’s what you desire...” Luke gestured toward the door. “I *could* take you up to Heresy. There’s much of the Inferno you haven’t had a chance to explore yet, and I’ve got Jane Austen’s original manuscript up there—among other things.”

“Other things?”

“Every sinful book ever written and satanic record ever made.”

My ears perked up at that a little.

Luke *had* made the Inferno to keep me entertained, I supposed—but if he’d really been clever, he would have taken me to *that* floor first.

“Let’s go, then.” I got up from the lounge and crossed over to Luke. A little awkwardly, I wrapped my arms around his waist. “Please?”

Luke glanced down at the hug. “Your mouth is saying *please*, but your body is saying *I’ve forgotten how physical contact works*, darling. Are you all right? That fountain was cold—if you’ve caught ill—”

I laughed and dropped my arms away from him.

“I’m...working on this, Luke.” I shrugged, my arms open wide. “When we fuck, things are easy. The rest of it...”

Luke smiled down at me and took me into his arms. When he drew me to his chest, he did it like it was the simplest, most natural thing in the entire world.

“We’ll get there.” He pressed a kiss to the top of my head like he was sealing a promise. “Until then—yes, I’d like to take you to Heresy. I imagine it’s exactly your kind of place.”

“I imagine you’re right,” I agreed. Books and records...Luke certainly knew how to please a girl.

In bed, and out of it too.

EVIE

The smell of rich, dark coffee, baked goods fresh from the oven, and old books greeted us when Phlegyas took us up to the sixth floor.

I slipped my hand into Luke's as the doors opened. Phlegyas' eyes tracked the movement, and he flashed me a kind, grandfatherly smile.

"You seem to be warming up to him, my lady." Phlegyas bowed, first to me, then to Luke. "If you don't mind my saying."

I tried not to blush at the attention—and I didn't even feel the urge to pull my hand away.

"Luke...certainly has his ways." I glanced up at Luke, who chuckled.

"Glad to hear it, love. Now, come on."

Luke pulled me out into Heresy. Every wall was covered in dark wooden bookshelves that stretched from the floor all the way up to the top of the high, vaulted ceiling. Matching wooden ladders were lined up around the room, set up so they could slide along each shelf.

There was a cute little coffee shop along the same wall as the elevator. In front of it was an open space full of cafe tables and chairs. Scruffy beatniks and wild-haired poets sat at them, sipping their espressos and scribbling in their journals. Beyond the tables, there were several cozy little sitting areas with plush armchairs and sofas.

Deeper into the room still, I spotted a stage with a grand piano and a few guitars on it. Behind them, twin staircases wound up the sides of the room to even more bookshelves.

“What do you think?” Luke asked as I came to a halt in the center of the room so I could take it all in.

“It’s...beautiful.” I wished I had better words for it, but it all seemed so far beyond anything I was capable of describing.

I was an academic, not a poet—unlike the man in pantaloons and a trench coat ordering a latte at the coffee bar, who bore a striking resemblance to the Bard himself.

“Let’s go sit down,” Luke suggested. He tugged me onward and I trailed behind him, slack-jawed and just the tiniest bit overwhelmed. “Look—our friends are already here.”

Luke took me to one of the little sitting areas, where Lock and Joan were positioned across from each other in twin armchairs. They didn’t even notice us as we arrived at their sides.

They were far too embroiled in the chess game they had going on to notice anything but the pieces lined up on the table between them.

“Check in twelve moves,” Joan said with a wicked smirk as she claimed Lock’s knight.

“Aye, lass, that was canty of ye.” Lock chuckled to himself as he claimed her knight with his bishop in return. “Check in six.”

I glanced over to the armchair behind them. Mal was sitting in it, playing flamenco music on a beautiful old Les Paul. Ava was perched on the chair’s arm with a dreamy smile lingering on her lips. She watched Mal’s fingers when she thought he was looking at her and shifted her gaze to his face every time he looked away.

It was Bea who finally noticed us in the end. She was sitting across the chair next to Mal and Ava with her legs draped over the arm and a huge book in her lap. When she looked up at us, her eyes widened, and her lips split into a grin.

“Well, if it isn’t Mr. and Mrs. Dawnstar.” She set the book aside and rose to give me a hug. “We wondered when you two were going to emerge from your little love shack, Eves.”

“Eves!” Joan and Ava shouted simultaneously as they looked up at us as well.

“What are you all doing here?” I asked, just a little surprised. I was hardly disappointed—but Hell was the last place I’d expected to see the three of them.

“Mal and Lock talked us into coming down from Above,” Bea explained. She gave Ava and Joan a look, then laughed. “I was outvoted for reasons that should be, well...obvious.”

“We’re going to stay here in the Inferno with you, Eves,” Ava said from her perch. “The way Mal and Lock have been talking, it’s probably safest for all of us.”

“Are there even more rooms here?” I looked up to Luke, who nodded.

“On the ninth floor, yes. As many rooms as we need.” Luke snapped his fingers, and the armchairs all scooted into a close circle. From somewhere behind us, a little loveseat joined them for Luke and me to sit on as well.

“So...you’re all moving in.” I could feel a little tension in my muscles as Luke eased me down onto the loveseat. He sat next to me and draped an arm around my shoulders. “Are you sure about this?”

“We’re hardly going to leave you in Hell alone, Eves.” Joan rolled her eyes like it was obvious.

“For as long as you’re here, we’re staying too,” said Ava.

“It’s just...” *I’m not sure that I can stay yet*, I wanted to tell them. But it seemed that they’d already made up their minds on the subject. “What about your classes? Your lives back in Los Angeles?”

“Didn’t Luke tell you?” Bea asked as she took her seat again. “We’ll keep going Above as we need to—with demonic protection, of course.”

“No...” I looked to Luke. “No, you didn’t.”

Luke shrugged. “I thought I’d let you mull it over for a little longer before I offered. But since it seems the cat’s already clawed its way through the bag...”

“Really? You’d let me keep teaching my classes and doing my thesis?” I hadn’t even been aware that was an option—let alone one that had already been all but decided.

“Of course, love. You’re safe here, and keeping you in the Inferno against your will...” He shared a look with Mal and Lock. They both laughed and looked away, shaking their heads. “It’s never worked out before. This seemed like a reasonable compromise—if it’s agreeable to you.”

“Can I still visit my parents?” I asked. They were all the way across the country in Vermont—and I still didn’t know how angels, demons or otherwise fared on airplanes.

“Of course you can. I’ll take you there in the chopper myself.”

“Get it, Eves?” Ava snickered behind her hand. “It’s a *hell*-icopter.”

Bea, Joan and I groaned in unison, but Mal let out the loudest laugh I’d ever heard from him.

“Clever girl,” he said, smiling up at her. “That’s pretty funny.”

At least that shut Ava up. She was blushing so pink I could almost see the heat coming up off her skin.

“Well...” I looked to Luke again, who seemed to be anticipating my answer. “You all do have a point, I suppose.”

“So you’ll stay?” Luke asked.

I nodded. “I’ll stay.”

I only hoped that this little plan worked out as well in real life as it sounded.

He was offering me all the protections of Hell, plus the opportunity to continue my life on Earth.

How could I say no?

“Good.” Luke clapped his hands together and leaned forward. “Then we have other things to discuss.”

“Like Ava and Mal’s impending nuptials,” Bea grumbled jokingly. “Shortly followed by Joan and Lock’s, I suppose.”

“Lock’s getting married?” a smooth, deep voice called from behind Luke and me. If money could talk, that was *exactly* what it would have sounded like. Whoever was attached to the voice must have been positively gorgeous too, because as soon as Bea looked up at him, she clammed up so fast, I was a little worried she’d just swallowed her tongue.

A tall, handsome man walked around the circle of chairs and stopped at Bea’s side. He had dark, thick waves of hair slicked back in a style straight from a 1950s gentleman’s style magazine. His suit was black and immaculately tailored. His shoes gleamed, polished to shine.

A smile of amusement spread across his lips as he looked down at Bea, who was pale and a little wide-eyed.

“It sounds like I’ll need to start looking for a wife myself soon at this rate,” he said—like he was saying it for her, and her alone. “I’m Abaddon. Don, if you like. I don’t think we’ve been introduced.”

Slowly, Bea reached out a hand for him to shake. He took it and gave her a single shake, then held it tight.

“And your name is...”

“Beatrice,” Bea blurted out. “Um, Bea, if you like.”

“I do.” He glanced down at the chair she was sitting in. “Do you mind, Bea?”

“Oh! I’m so sorry, not at all.” As Bea shot up out of the chair and offered it to him, I didn’t think I’d ever seen her so flustered.

Certainly not around a man, at any rate.

“I’ll just, um...” Bea’s eyes scanned Heresy as Don sat down. “I’ll go grab another chair and—”

“No need.” Don hadn’t let her hand go yet. He tugged on it, just once, and Bea went tumbling into his lap. “There. And now that everyone’s seated...”

Joan, Ava and I exchanged a glance. All three of us were trying our damndest not to laugh—to varying effects.

I was pretty sure if Bea didn’t calm down in a few seconds, Joan’s ribs were going to split from trying to hold her laughter in.

“I take it you’ve been able to summon the Fallen?” Luke asked Don.

Don nodded. “Wasn’t easy, but when has it ever been?”

“The Fallen are my comrades, Evie,” Luke explained to me. “The six other angels who joined me in my rebellion.”

“There are more of you?” It seemed like a stupid question as soon as it left my lips. “I mean, of course there are. That makes sense.”

“Lock here is one.” Luke nodded to Lock, who grabbed his glass of whiskey from the chess table and raised it to Luke. “The other five are generally a bit more difficult to track down.”

“Not impossible, though,” Don said. He placed a hand on Bea’s knee familiarly, and suddenly, her cheeks were even redder than Ava’s. “They’re gathering their armies and headed here as we speak.”

“And the angels?”

“On retreat,” Leigh—Legion—answered from behind us. There was only one of her this time, dressed in a pair of jeans and a vintage Black Sabbath t-shirt. She came around to lean her arms on top of the back of the chair that Don and Bea currently occupied. The Fourth was with her, clad in his helmet once more. He stood to Luke’s side, silent as ever. “The Fourth and I did a sweep of the city. They’re still licking their wounds from the last battle, localized to Paradise for now—”

“But not for long,” said Mal. “Once they regroup, they’ll be back with a new plan before we know it—whether the treaty is broken or not.”

“Aye,” Lock grunted. “The pipers will be blaring their battle tunes here in Vegas soon, no doubt.”

“But this time, fate is on our side,” said Luke. “Not theirs. If Sin City is the site of the next great war, at least it’s on our turf.”

“Your turf... Luke, how much of Vegas do you *actually* own?” I asked, curious.

“All of it, love. Adversary Industries is invested in every bar and casino here.” He gave me a tired smile. “Everything but Paradise.”

The Fourth finally moved, though he still didn’t speak. He merely tapped the side of his helmet with his index finger twice, and Luke sighed.

“Good point, old friend. We still don’t know how Evie’s memories were taken from her.”

“Has to be wee Michael, surely?” Lock mused. “He’s the only one with motive.”

“If it was, we should count ourselves lucky,” Luke agreed. “To enter the Inferno, get all the way to the ninth floor, gain entry to our suite and still have time to take Evie’s memory from her...I don’t know how he did it, but I know that if he did, he burned for his efforts.”

I recalled the way that Lock and Mal had smoldered from just being inside Paradise and breathed a sigh of relief.

“So we really are safe,” I said softly. “For now, at least.”

“For as long as you’ll accept our protection,” Luke corrected me. “If we play this cleverly, no one has to die this time around. Least of all you, love.”

I bit my lip and looked down at my lap.

It was going to be a big change, but...

Well. They’d all already laid it out for me.

Even if I did have free will here in Hell, there wasn’t really much of a choice.

Before the conversation could continue, a small man climbed the stairs to Heresy’s stage. He was dressed in a tailcoat and tall boots that should have made him look like Mozart—except for the fact that his coat was made of purple silk embroidered in a psychedelic purple print.

I squinted and leaned forward as I studied the dark, coiffed curls of his hair and the frills of his shirt. When he began playing the piano, I recognized the song immediately.

Purple Rain.

“Is that...” I said slowly. I didn’t want to make any assumptions, but—
Luke chuckled. “Yes, love. There are many princes that have taken refuge here in the Inferno after dead. That particular one is my favorite.” He stood up and offered me his hand. “Would you like to dance?”

I tried to hide my smile as I placed my hand in his, but my excitement was a little too much to conceal.

“This really is an amazing place, Luke,” I admitted as he led me to the empty space in front of the stage.

“Amazing enough to make a life in?” He wound an arm around my waist and drew my body close to his as we began to sway.

“I still have a life Above,” I reminded him.

“Of course you do. And I wouldn’t dare try to take it from you.” He laughed, though I could still see that glint of old hurts in his pale blue eyes. “I’ve learned that one the hard way.”

“But...you do know how to tempt a girl,” I said softly.

All of this still felt so new and strange to me, but every time I saw pain in Luke’s eyes, I knew I was the one who’d put it there.

It made my chest clench and my heart pang and my mind race as I tried to think of a way to make that pain go away.

“I’d hope so, love.” Luke lowered his lips down to mine. “That *is* my job.”

He kissed me, slow and sweet as the music swelled around us. The way his lips burned against mine was delicious.

We’d had so many kisses now—in memory and in reality—but still, when Luke’s lips were on mine, they never failed to stir my entire body to life.

I closed my eyes and leaned into it.

I didn’t know what I was doing, or even what the future held...

But this man was my husband—and since my husband kissed like *that*, it hardly seemed right not to enjoy it for everything I could.

When I opened my eyes again, I saw that we weren’t alone on the dance floor. Ava and Mal were spinning slow circles around us in a lazy two-step, their bodies a chaste few feet apart. Joan and Lock waltzed awkwardly, laughing and poking fun at each other as they romped across the room.

Even Bea and Don joined us after a few minutes. Bea was doing her best to look annoyed about it, but if Don noticed, he certainly didn’t seem

bothered by it.

Meanwhile, Leigh had multiplied again. Two of them were dancing with their bodies close and their arms draped sensually around each other. A third Leigh sat with The Fourth on the edge of the dance floor, pouring them both glasses of whiskey from a decanter—though I had no idea how The Fourth would drink it without taking his helmet off.

“He’s not much of a dancer, is he?” I nodded at The Fourth so Luke could follow my gaze.

“Dancing might be a bit beyond him,” Luke agreed. “But he’s kind and fair and has all sorts of other admirable qualities that more than make up for it.”

We danced a little longer in silence. It was a different dance than the one we’d shared in Lust the night we met. I knew that if I quipped something at Luke, he’d answer quickly and cleverly and probably in a way that made my cunt ache for him all over again...

But I was beginning to enjoy our silences together too. It was something new—something exciting in its plainness.

We could be in a room full of people together, and without even saying a word to each other, Luke’s hands on my body were still so intimate that if I closed my eyes, I felt like we were completely alone.

“So this is my life now.” I finally broken the silence as I placed my cheek against Luke’s chest. “Luxuriating in the Inferno with you for the rest of time.”

“Only for as long as you want.” He smoothed his hand down my back, tracing my spine. “I know how much your work means to you, Evie. Your family too. And while I’d prefer it if I could keep you here, tied naked to my bed and completely unable to leave—”

“Is that a threat, Luke?”

“A suggestion,” he said with a wink. “Something to keep in mind for later.”

I shivered as I imagined it—being nude and helpless, my wrists bound to the headboard while Luke undressed before me with dark intent in his eyes. I had to swallow and blink several times to get the image from my head.

“Something to keep in mind,” I agreed, a little hoarse.

Luke laughed. “Barring that, though... You can come and go as you please, love. For as long as the treaty stands, it’s only indirect attacks from

angels we have to worry about when you're Above. And while you're Below..."

Our eyes met. "Yes?"

"You're mine," he said simply. He pressed a kiss to the little starburst beneath my eye. "All fucking mine."

"I...I think I can handle that."

"I'd certainly hope so."

"Free will, protection..." A smile found my lips as I glanced up at the piano player on the stage. "Surrounded by music and books and priceless works of art that I'm still pretty sure you must have stolen—"

"It would be in character," Luke admitted. "But no. Those are originals—and very much ours."

Ours. The way he said it made everything click together in perfect realness.

He didn't just consider the Inferno his possession—and I no longer thought of it as my prison, either.

Everything Luke owned was his—and mine as well.

"I can't exactly complain about having a husband who doesn't cheat on me, either." I was thinking of Adam less and less now. Everything that had gone down between us had only happened a few days ago, but after all this time I'd spent with Luke trying to remember, Adam starting to feel just like that. A memory. "Or a husband who actually knows how to fuck, for that matter."

"It's not exactly difficult to figure out," Luke agreed. "Especially not when it's you and me."

Up on stage, the final note of the song rang out. The pianist gave a simple bow to us, then took his leave.

"Come with me," Luke said. He took my hand and drew me toward the stage. "I don't think I'm quite ready for the music to be over yet."

"You play?" I asked hopefully. "Because I sure as hell don't."

"I'll teach you, if you like." We moved up the steps of the stage, hand in hand. Luke sat down on the piano's bench, then patted his thigh.

I took a breath, then placed myself on his lap. My feet settled between his as he moved my hands to the keys.

"Put your fingers on top of mine," he instructed. "Feel how they move and try to anticipate where they'll go next."

“Between my thighs, if memory serves me right.” I laughed as Luke began to play a slow, delicate tune. It was dark and luscious, in a minor key—but as his fingers shifted beneath mine, I closed my eyes and did as he told me.

Sure enough, by the time the key changed to a major, I was able to anticipate his every move.

“That’s amazing,” I breathed. “How am I doing that?”

“Muscle memory,” Luke said. “You might not have learned piano in this lifetime—but you’ve played beautifully in others. This piece in particular...”

Luke paused and moved my hands to the stretch of keys on the right. His own fingers brushed the lower set of keys to the left.

“Pick up the melody,” he told me. “I’ll take the base.”

My fingers trembled over the keys. “Luke, I don’t know this song. I don’t think I can—”

“You can,” he assured me. “Just feel it. It will come.”

Sure enough, as Luke’s fingers started thrumming the lower keys, mine shifted against the higher ones. To my amazement, a perfect melody started to flow beneath my fingertips.

It was haunting, still dark, but not dreary.

It felt familiar somehow.

Full of hope.

Full of love.

“I know this,” I whispered in awe as the music swelled around us. “This is our song.”

“Written together, not long after the piano was first invented,” Luke confirmed.

“This isn’t just muscle memory, though.” I shook my head as my fingers continued to play the tune. It felt as natural as anything I’d ever done—like breathing. Like a heartbeat. What I didn’t understand was *how*. “We just spent days and days trying to make me remember something that happened in *this* lifetime, Luke.”

“And now that your memory is back, more will come,” he promised.

“Is that your plan for our future?” I asked. “You’ll show me all the amazing things I once knew, and I’ll slowly but surely fall in love with you all over again?”

“If you’re not in love with me already,” Luke countered. His lips curled into a smirk as he pressed them to my shoulder. “But no—now that you have your memories back, we have bigger plans to fulfill.”

“Such as?”

Our fingers fell away from the keys in unison as the song ended.

“Such as your coronation,” Luke said.

“My...coronation.” I turned to him in disbelief. “Coronation for... what, exactly?”

“For all of this, love.” Luke gestured to the dance floor, where I spotted the girls and Luke’s demons among a slew of other dancers. They were all applauding gently, a warm smile on every set of lips. “For you. For me. For our future.”

“A...coronation.” I furrowed my brow. Marrying Luke was one thing, but I was the shy, scrappy academic daughter of a New Jersey garbage collector and a second-grade teacher. The biggest thing I’d ever dreamed of was a doctorate—and even that had always felt like a stretch. Coronations, though...those were for royalty. I might have been wed to the Devil, but I certainly wasn’t *that*. “But *why*?”

“Because you’re my bride, Evelyn Dawnstar.” Luke said my name like it was the sweetest set of syllables he could possibly hold on his tongue. “And you can’t be Queen of Hell without a crown.”

MICHAEL

A cool breeze blew in from the west, off the ocean. Dark clouds gathered overhead as Evelyn St. John—now Evie Dawnstar—hit the two-mile mark of her run.

“Look at her go.” Gabe scoffed as we stood perched at the top of the hill that the running track encircled. “If I didn’t know better, I’d say she looks like a hard girl to catch.”

“Not for the adversary.” I crossed my arms over my chest and shook my head. “Nor for us.”

In the old stories, if you listened to such things, it was the always the Greeks who had the monopoly on revenge.

Golden Apollo, who gave the gift of foresight to Cassandra only to turn all ears against her words after she rejected him.

Ravishing Aphrodite, who cursed an entire island of women with a repellent stench when they neglected their worship of her.

Bloody Aries, who brought Olympus itself tumbling down over nothing more than a careless slight.

Heaven, though—it wasn’t revenge that we angels sought.

Only justice.

And then, only peace.

For whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap.

Several weeks had passed since the adversary had managed to return the memories of this terrible new incarnation of his Lilith.

For every moment of that time she'd been here on Earth, we'd kept watch on her.

And with every second of it, the black dread in my gut only grew.

"Lucifer is keeping up his end of the treaty, then." I scowled as she placed her sneaker on the edge of a fountain to stretch her slender calves.

"So far," Gabriel said with a low growl. "He flies her over from Sin City in his helicopter, she teaches her classes and meets with her so-called adviser—"

"At least we have eyes on her." More than she would ever know. "It's not much, but it's something."

"He's so...compliant with her this time around." Gabriel shook his head. "It's unlike him. Something is wrong this time."

"As long as she's not pregnant yet." It was that small, fragile hope built around the wonders of human birth control, on which all my hopes for the future were hinged.

"Yet." I heard Gabe's jaw click as he clenched it tight.

"Have we heard from our mutual friend Below lately?"

"Where do you think I'm getting the intel on her movements from?"

"Good." I nodded. All assets in order. "And our friend suggests she intends on continuing this charade on Earth indefinitely?"

Gabe checked his watch. "You can ask our friend himself soon. He should be here any moment now."

"This is a dangerous game we're playing, Gabriel." Especially as we had to bring our asset up from Hell itself any time we wanted more information. It was either that, or we burned. "We need to end this again. And soon."

"Do you think—" Gabriel huffed and looked away. "I don't even want to say it."

"Humor me."

"The great war. The final one." Gabriel glanced at me from the corners of his eyes. "Could this be it?"

I glowered.

It was a possibility. Things that had once been certainties had suddenly been made uncertain. There were too many variables this time for me to properly track or predict.

"As long as she doesn't become with child." I placed a hand on Gabriel's shoulder and turned him to me. "You know what it means for us

—for all of us—if that changes.”

“Not just a war on Earth this time.” Gabriel’s eyes flashed with a terrible light. “A war across Heaven and Hell too.”

“If it comes—and it might...” I shook my head. “They cannot win it. If balance cannot be maintained, we must emerge from this as conquerors—not slaves.”

“You don’t need to remind me.”

“I do,” I assured him. “We all need to remember what’s at stake.”

“I don’t want that war on my shoulders yet, Michael,” Gabe hissed. “Nor, I think, do you.”

“You’re right.” I ran my tongue across my lips and let out a breath. “We need a new strategy. Something that won’t fail us this time.”

“You said that about the last two.” Gabriel rolled his eyes. “First the human mafia was meant to take care of this for us, you said. Then, you said, without her memories, the treaty would surely be broken—”

“I don’t need you to remind me.” There was nothing I liked less than the recollections of my past failures.

“If we need to remember the stakes, then let us also remember our *mistakes*, Michael.” Gabriel laughed, low and gruff. “What is it next, then? I hope it’s good.”

“It has to be.” I slipped my fingers across my knuckles. “We need to make Lucifer an offer, I think. One that he isn’t likely to refuse.”

“And if that fails?”

I shrugged. “We break the treaty ourselves.”

“Michael—”

“I know. It’s dangerous. But if it’s all we have, we take it.”

A throat cleared behind us. I didn’t turn to see who it was.

The only being who could bother us here was the only one we were expecting.

Our honored guest here on Earth had arrived from Hell at last.

“Son of Ares,” I greeted him. “King of the Lapiths.”

“Archangel,” he grunted back at me. “Lovely day on Earth, isn’t it?”

“Enjoy the cool breeze on your cheeks while you can.” A noise of frustration hummed in my throat. “Have you brought us news?”

“I have,” he said.

“If you want to see that lovely daughter of yours again, you’d best make it good,” said Gabriel.

I held up a hand to stop him before he went further.

If we wanted to keep our mutual friend as exactly that—a friend—we had to deal in blessings. Not threats.

“The Lilith seems happy in the Inferno,” our friend began. His voice quavered only slightly—not a bad thing. Even angels deserved the respect that came with fear. “She and the adversary are visiting her parents tonight for the weekend. She sounded pleased about it when they spoke of the matter earlier.”

I nodded to Gabriel. “Seems that you’re going to Vermont.”

Gabriel scowled. “And I *hate* Vermont.”

“Is that all?” I asked over my shoulder.

“No,” our friend answered quickly. “There’s...something else. Maybe something you can use.”

“Go on, then.”

“The Lilith, on the morning after her wedding night...was not *quite* so pleased with her situation.”

“After you stole all her memories from her, I don’t suppose she was.” I allowed myself a small smirk.

“She tried to leave when she woke up, Archangel.”

“As she often does, I understand.”

“He stopped her with an order. Part of their vows, I believe. When she tried to go, he wouldn’t let her. He told her to stay, and she could not leave.”

“The treaty involves the taking of living humans to Hell,” I reminded him. My shoulders bristled with annoyance. This was a waste of our time. “It says nothing about keeping them there.”

“And when they returned from the battle outside Paradise,” our friend continued, “He ushered her in again. With an order. *Come*.”

I blinked. Above us, the clouds parted, releasing a single ray of sun.

“And she obeyed?” I asked, the wheels of my mind already turning.

“She did. Whether she wanted to or not, I cannot say—but yes, she obeyed.”

At my side, Gabe’s lips split into a grin.

“That doesn’t sound like free will to me, Michael.”

“No,” I breathed. “No it does not.”

“Is it enough?”

“A technicality at best. But...perhaps one we can make use of with a technicality of our own.”

In the end, if it came to that point, it wouldn't matter either way.

Either Lucifer had broken the treaty with his order—o

r we would break it for him. For as long as no angel harmed a living human on Earth, we were resigned to merely creating accidents. Were we to harm any of them directly, every demon in Hell would be free to attack and kill our agents as well.

But we only needed to harm one human.

Her.

“It would have to be a death blow if we did it,” Gabriel said. “The treaty goes back into effect as soon as she reincarnates. We managed to delay it last time. We can quicken it this time. But if even a hair on her pretty little head is harmed without killing her as well, it would mean prolonged carnage on both sides. Who knows for how long.”

“I know.”

“Anything short of a single killing blow, Michael, and our losses would be too great. Demons have no sense of restraint.”

“I know, Gabriel,” I said again. “But a treaty broken on a technicality on their side means we can employ our own technicalities.”

“Such as?”

I smiled. Perhaps one of the truest, most genuine smiles my lips had felt since the beginning of creation itself.

“You may go, Son of Ares.”

“Of course, Archangel.”

I waited for our friend to depart before I spoke again.

“Imagine, Gabriel, a world where there *was* no treaty.”

“I do,” Gabriel replied. “Every morning and every night.”

“Imagine a world where there were no more reincarnations, either.”

Gabriel snorted. “Alright. I'm listening.”

“The Lilith will be vulnerable until her coronation. But once she becomes Queen of Hell, she'll be more powerful than ever.”

“We'll have to kill her before that happens then,” Gabriel said with a nod. “But I don't see how that will change anything.”

“Oh, I don't want her dead. That would only start the cycle all over again.”

“But if we don’t kill her—the prophecy is clear that if she gets pregnant...”

“I’m well-aware of the prophecy, Gabriel. Giving the Adversary and his bride the chance to bear a child is the last thing I want. Believe me.” Slowly, I smiled. “But maybe there’s another way. Maybe the throne of Hell is the perfect place for a woman like her.””

“You *want* her to become queen?” Gabriel scowled. “I’m not following you.”

“No. But you will.” Already, I could see it all so clearly. No more variables. Only fate, pulled out in a single direction—one ineffable strand of destiny that would lead us to victory. “We’ll make things difficult on them, of course. At no point in the days to come should they be allowed to feel truly safe.”

Gabriel nodded and cracked his knuckles. “I can certainly see to that.”

“Good. And when the time comes...we’ll let Evie St. James have her crown.” I raised my eyes to the Heavens. “But I think it would be for the best if she was left to rule alone.”

“We can’t kill the Adversary, Michael. Who knows what effects that would have on the Earth if we did.”

“We can’t,” I agreed as a smile curled on my lips. “But we can do something far, far worse.”



Get Lucifer’s Queen



I was born to give the devil his due.

When I woke up naked next to the hottest man I've ever met, I had no idea just how much my life was about to change. And I had no clue the man was the devil himself.

Literally.

I promised to be his for all eternity, and so far, it's going well. Luke will give me anything to keep me happy: jewels, food, days in bed, and more. I don't need material things to stay. I feel more for Luke than I've ever felt before. But am I ready to give him my heart?

I'm meant to be his queen, but now that Luke has found me, I'm in danger from everyone who opposes him.

This isn't my first lifetime, and the last time he tried to crown me it ended in blood.
My blood.

Angels will do whatever it takes to stop my coronation. Luke promises it won't happen again. He says he'll sacrifice anything to protect me – even his soul. All I have to do is trust him.

Only The Devil can protect me from Heaven.

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LUCIFER'S QUEEN

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FOREWORD

*“...da lei vien l'animosa leggiadria
ch'al ciel ti scorge per destro sentero,
sí ch'i' vo già de la speranza altero.”*

—Francesco Petrarca
“Sonnet XIII”

PROLOGUE

LUKE

I love the way you remember, darling girl.

Every time you think you have it all, it's such a fucking pleasure to show you that I can offer so much more.

You recall now how I rescued you from a loveless marriage to man who would never realize your worth.

Now, you ravishing creature, I can show you how worthy you truly are.

You remember how I claimed you for myself. How I conquered you so deliciously, so completely, you were moaning my name in ecstasy barely an hour after we said our vows.

Now, my perfect wife, I can show you exactly how a *real* husband treats his bride.

You remember how I saved you from the angels who would steal you away from me.

Now, you know that I'll bring Heaven itself crashing down just to keep you safe for the rest of our lives.

You'll have the protection of my body. My realm. My money. My power. All the love in my heart.

This is my wedding gift to you, Evie: *everything*. From my hard, throbbing cock right down to my infernal, eternal soul.

It's all for you.

Everything I do, everything I own, everything I am—

It's always belonged to you.

Now, with your coronation on the horizon, I can finally make you more than just my wife.

You'll be my queen as well—and as radiant as you are, you were fucking *born* to wear a crown.

But there are costs to remembering. Prices a beauty like you should never have to pay.

You're in deadly danger now and you know it. Heaven itself wants to harm you. They'd take your life in an instant if they could—

Not that I'll let them.

Not this time.

Not ever again.

I'll sacrifice anything I have to protect you, my love.

If I have to sell my soul itself to save yours, then so be it.

You're *mine*, Evie. You're mine, and I'm yours—even to my final breath.

Let no one say that the Devil doesn't pay his debts.

EVIE

Satan smiled while he slept. The hard lines of his full lips curled into a lopsided smirk about ten minutes after he closed his eyes. His smile twitched and expanded as he dreamed. It always, without fail, lasted the whole night through.

That was just one of the many things I'd been learning about Luke over the last couple of weeks.

The Devil, as it turned out, was a fascinating man.

My parents' rickety old two-story creaked and groaned around us. The cold Vermont winter shook the house down like it owed them money. The windows rattled with a bitter wind that slipped through every little crack and crevice it could find.

I woke up in Luke's arms, saw his smile, and instinctively snuggled closer.

There might have been a freezing snowstorm raging outside and fighting its way in, but I didn't have to feel it. Sleeping with Luke was like having my own personal space heater to cuddle all night long.

His body always burned nice and hot—and he was far, far sexier than any space heater I'd ever known to boot.

I purred happily as I tucked my icy toes against his warm, toasty feet. My fingers rose and fell over the rock-hard ridges of his chest.

And as my hand trailed lower...

His chest wasn't the only thing that was rock hard.

Another exciting thing I'd learned while being married to the Devil: he liked to sleep in the nude.

I wrapped my cold fingers around his thick, stiff cock and let out a soft little moan.

Feeling up my own husband was hardly a sin—but it sure as hell felt like one.

Yet another new bit of knowledge—I *really* liked to sin.

With Luke, I was ravished daily. We were still in the honeymoon phase, sure, but so far, there was no sign of his lust waning yet.

Luke was always ravenous. He was relentless in the way he wanted me—and he wasn't afraid to act on it, either. How many nights had I gone to bed exhausted and aching deliciously, full of Luke's cum? How many mornings had I been stirred from a wet dream, only to find Luke's head already between my legs and his tongue slipping between the lips of my cunt?

More than I could count, honestly.

I smiled as I pulled the blankets up over my head and laid my cheek against the firm ridges of Luke's lower abs.

Maybe it was time I finally paid him back for all those orgasmic wake-up calls.

It was dark, warm and humid beneath the blanket, but I could still make out the pearl of precum swelling up at Luke's tip. His scent enveloped me, sweet spices and loamy earth, as I stuck out my tongue and licked the precum away.

Luke moaned gently but didn't wake.

Good.

I rolled the taste of his precum around in my mouth, relishing it. It was faintly salty, like single drop of ocean, but gone far too soon.

If I wanted more, I knew I'd have to work for it.

Luckily, I'd never had a problem getting my hands a little dirty to get what I wanted.

I pressed a kiss to Luke's tip, then let my lips slide down its smooth, deep pink flesh. Luke's cock was warm, but my mouth was warmer. I lapped at the underside of his dick teasingly as I worked my fist up and down his shaft at the base.

Another moan came from beyond the blankets, this one even deeper than before.

He might not have been awake yet, but I had a feeling that whatever he was dreaming about, he was enjoying it.

I set a slow, measured pace as I bobbed my head up and down over Luke's lap. With my free hand, I cupped Luke's balls. They were full, heavy, and burning hot. I massaged them gently as my pace increased. Every time Luke's cock slid over my tongue, I could feel the burning inside me flare up to match his heat like a hungry echo.

I wanted him.

I needed him.

I wasn't sure that it would ever stop, no matter how much of him I had.

I wasn't sure I ever wanted it to.

I sucked harder. Luke's cock was heavy on my tongue. His thickness made my jaw ache in all the best ways. My lips created a seal around him, greedy and airtight. As I pumped my mouth up and down, faster and faster, my saliva lubricated his shaft.

I'd never liked sucking cock so much before Luke—but now, I couldn't get enough of it. Just smelling him made my cunt pang with longing. Tasting him like this, feeling him fill my mouth—it made me so soaked, my pussy almost hurt with how tightly it was clenched.

I gave his balls another soft squeeze as my lips kissed against my fist. Luke's cock was long enough, even taking him halfway like this sent his tip slipping down my throat.

I swallowed hard to massage his tip as I came back up and was rewarded with another moan. This one was insistent. Almost...angry.

Yes. I liked Luke angry. There was passion in his anger that moved me like nothing else ever had. Loving Luke was like loving an active volcano. Dangerous. *Thrilling*. He was a dark, vengeful god and I was his virginal worshiper, all too happy to throw myself into the molten heat of his embrace.

Luke's balls throbbed as I took more of him down my throat. I could feel his fist shift against the blanket, clutching it furiously and twisting it hard.

He was close. Beneath my cheek, his abs swelled slightly with deep, labored breaths.

Just a few more licks and he was going to erupt.

And *God*, I loved how it felt to make him explode.

I released him from my fist and moved my hand to his chest. I could feel his breath rising and falling better like that. Every time my lips descended on his shaft, he gasped like he'd been drowning. Every time I pulled back up, his breath left his lungs hard and sharp like he'd been punched.

His cock throbbed inside me. His thighs flexed with a shudder and his balls clenched in the palm of my hand. As I dove down on him one last time, taking him all the way past my gag reflex into the tight, slick embrace of my throat, Luke let out an unhinged snarl. His hips bucked in desperation as his cock swelled in my mouth.

Cum rushed out of his tip as I pulled back up. I sucked him even harder as it splashed over my tongue and filled my mouth.

He might have been done, but I was genuinely enjoying myself.

I didn't want to *stop* sucking him.

Even after Luke pulled the blanket away, exposing me to the cold air of the morning once again.

"*Mm. Fuck, Evie.*" Luke's voice was a low, hoarse British rumble. His accent made my ears tingle and sent a wave excitement rippling down my spine. "You've drained me, love."

I slipped Luke's cock from my lips with a final flick of my tongue and took it in my fist instead.

"Really?" I asked. "You don't feel spent to me." He was already stiffening again. I could feel his heart beating in every vein that pulsed up and down his shaft.

"Keep pumping it like that and I might have to do something about it." His eyes were still closed, veiled with dark, thick lashes, but his eyebrow twitched suggestively.

My pussy clenched up immediately.

Lord. Even just a twitch of his eyebrow was enough to do it for me right now.

"Like what?" I stroked up the length of Luke's shaft, nice and slow. "You gonna try and stop me?"

"No." Luke's eyes flicked open. His pale blues were narrowed and glinting sinisterly. "Why the ever-loving fuck would I want to do that?"

I swallowed hard, licked my lips, then nodded.

Luke Dawnstar could do anything he wanted to me, as long as he kept talking like that.

Back in college, my friend Joan had once told me that when you got married, it was like publicly declaring in front of all your family and friends that you and your husband were mutually planning on powering down your sex drives, never to fuck again.

With Luke, that couldn't have been further from the truth.

He moved suddenly with supernatural speed. He bolted upright. His hand shot toward me, a blur. Before I knew it, he had one of my ankles captured in his fist. He gave it a sharp tug, dragging me across the bed toward him.

"Luke!" I yelped. I laughed as I tried to kick him away. He only grabbed my other ankle for my efforts.

Just like that, I was completely at Luke's mercy.

As he smirked down at me and spread my legs apart, I couldn't imagine any place I'd rather be.

"Good God, you're beautiful." Luke shook his head slowly in disbelief as his gaze raked up and down my nude body. His eyes lingered on my lips and made a detour at each of my breasts, but the destination was inevitable.

Despite how cold the room was, a wave of heat washed over me as Luke stared down at my cunt. Several seconds passed. They felt like eternities. Neither of us moved.

I knew exactly how I must have looked. The dark gold curls of my pubic hair, darker than normal from how soaked my pussy was. My wetness, glistening as it practically poured from my slit. My nipples were hard from the cold, but my clit was swollen, twitching with need and burning so hot that if Luke didn't put his mouth on me soon, I was pretty sure the longing would engulf me completely.

But Luke only watched, devilishly silent as he took in the sight.

I'd never been stared at like this before. Luke was greedy with the way he looked at me. He looked for as long as he liked, always, and always with a certain awe.

Like I was a piece of art, and he was just waiting for the right moment to nail me up against the wall.

Luke lowered himself between my thighs instead. He moved slowly, like a panther through the night. A predator stalking its prey.

I was already his captive—and when his hungry eyes met mine, I knew exactly what he was planning on eating for breakfast.

“There,” he breathed over my pussy. He tilted his head up and down as he breathed in again, inhaling my scent. “Mm. Perfect thing. You smell delicious, love. Like spring.”

“You like me?” My voice was smaller than usual. Almost innocent.

My innocence was a bit of a stretch at this point, though.

I hadn’t been innocent since the first moment Luke’s lips had touched my skin.

“I love you, Evie. Especially when you’re fucking dripping for me like this.” Luke bent down to lay an impossibly chaste kiss on my pussy lips. “When the Almighty promised He’d never flood the world again, He obviously miscalculated how wet your cunt gets.”

“Better build yourself an ark, then.” I closed my eyes and bucked my hips up toward him.

Luke released my ankles and took my hips into his hands instead. He shoved them down onto the mattress brutally.

“Think I’d rather drown,” he growled—then, he got to work.

Luke ate pussy like a man starved. His tongue lapped up and down my slit ravenously. He kept my hips pinned, no matter how hard I tried, I couldn’t reposition my clit—but it didn’t matter.

After he’d gotten his fill of my honey, he took my clit between his lips quickly enough. His tongue pressed down on it hard, then moved in little circles so slowly and achingly that it made my breath shudder and my eyes roll back.

I could have stayed just like that for the rest of my days—but when Luke decided he was ready to make me come, it never took long. Before I knew it, my knees were trembling against his cheeks. His stubble tickled against my inner thighs as his fingers pressed into my folds in search of my G-spot.

Almost immediately, I felt an orgasm building. It was confusing, only because my body didn’t seem to know where the orgasm was going to hit first—my clit, or my core.

In the end, it turned out to be both at once.

My entire body went stiff as a jolt of pleasure shot through me. My ears pounded. My toes curled. My fingers tangled in the thick, dark roots of Luke’s hair, clinging to him for dear life—and a ragged moan left my throat.

For a moment, it was hard to tell whether Luke was making me come or killing me—or both.

“That’s one.” As my moans turned to exhausted whimpers, Luke finally raised his lips from my clit. His mouth glistened with the fruits of his labors. He licked them clean with a purr, then dipped down between my thighs all over again. “Let’s make it ten.”

“You’re insatiable, Luke.” I laughed as he nipped at my inner thigh. “I don’t think your lust would be satisfied even if there were a dozen of me.”

“Maybe I just can’t get enough of you.” Luke kissed each of my hip bones as he moved his body up over mine. “I’m ensnared by you, Evie. Possessed. Can you blame an addict for craving more of his favorite vice?”

I sighed happily and closed my eyes. His lips seared across my ribs. Their heat lingered at the curves of my breasts.

Not even the icy winds roaring outside and the chill of the room around us could dissipate the flames of Luke’s desire.

“You’re truly unlike anyone else I’ve ever been with, Luke.” I turned my hand over to brush the back of my palm against his stubbled cheek. It was thicker this morning than usual. Rougher and more rugged, too. “Even if Vermont is turning you into a lumberjack.”

Luke folded his hand over mine and pressed it harder to his skin.

“You wouldn’t like me with a beard?” Luke rubbed his cheek against my hand, tickling my palm with the prickles that stretched up from his jaw into his hairline.

“On the contrary, I’m afraid I’d like it too much.” I glanced at the moon-shaped clock on the wall. It was ten o’clock already. Dad would be home from his early morning shift soon, and if I stayed in bed with Luke any longer, we’d end up fucking. I was pretty sure we’d already tortured Dad with the sound of our creaking bed enough for one weekend. “But if you’re going to grow a beard before breakfast, you’d better work quick. I’m starving.”

“So am I, love.” He dipped down to steal a delicious kiss from my lips. “Different kind of starving, maybe—but I know exactly how you feel.”

“My hunger’s first,” I insisted with a smile. I moved my fingertips to his temple and raked them through his waves. “Yours can wait a while longer. You’ve already had your fill.”

“That’s where you’re wrong, love.” Still, Luke closed his eyes and nodded in agreement. “But you’re right—you take precedence.”

“Do I?” I arched a teasing eyebrow.

“Always,” he assured me. When his eyes opened, they were glimmering wickedly all over again. “Just remember the restraint I’m showing right now when I decide to make use of your mouth again on the flight home tonight.”

“In the helicopter?” I laughed—but even so, I couldn’t help but imagine how much fun it could be to go down on Luke while he flew us over the snowy cornfields of the Midwest. “Sounds dangerous.”

“Oh, it will be.” Luke claimed another kiss. “But so am I, darling—and so are you.”

EVIE

My old room hadn't changed much since I'd left for college. The bedspread was still an ugly, psychedelic purple. The corded phone on my nightstand was still shaped like a big hotdog nestled in a plastic—a true indicator of my teenage irreverence. My *Born in the USA* poster was still on the wall over my desk, with Bruce Springsteen's denim-clad backside looking almost as good as Luke's did while he admired my bookshelves collection.

"You used to read everything, didn't you?" He stood in front of the jam-packed shelves, gloriously nude in a way that made me second-guess not going for round two in bed. I'd never wanted to sink my teeth into a man's ass before I met Luke, but now... sometimes, it was difficult not to imagine it. Luke's shoulder muscles rippled as he turned his torso to the side and held up two books from the shelves. "*Anna Karenina* and *Fight Club*? Your range astounds me, love."

"I *still* read everything, dummy." I smiled as I kicked my suitcase open and grabbed a matching set of red La Perla from it. "Do you really think I would have married you if you didn't have such a massive—"

"Cock?" Luke suggested. He turned all the way around and smirked, knowing that my eyes would naturally be drawn to the thick length of manhood that was still standing at attention between his thighs.

"*Library*," I corrected him with a laugh. "Your huge dick was more of a pleasant bonus, really."

My love of books had changed as little as my childhood bedroom, and Luke's collection of first editions and author's original copies kept me just as satisfied as Luke's cock did.

Moving into Hell with Luke hadn't been my first choice of living arrangements. If I was being honest, I would have preferred a nice little apartment near UCLA to cut down on my commute time to class.

But being Luke's eternal soul mate came with a few difficulties—like the army of angels who wanted nothing more than to see me in a coffin.

It meant the Inferno, where angels feared to tread, was the safest place for me. This quick weekend trip to my parents' place was the first time I'd slept anywhere other than Luke's lavish penthouse suite since our wedding night.

Luke's library had copies of everything, from first editions of Shakespeare's *First Folio* to original author's manuscripts of *The Histories* signed by Herodotus himself.

I'd even read things in the Inferno that the rest of world still thought were lost to time completely.

Who would have thought when Hemingway's first wife left a suitcase full of his short stories on a train, they'd end up in the private collection of the Devil himself? And Sylvia Plath's last journal—the one that Ted Hughes had burned? Luke had that too.

The jumble of dog-eared second-hand novels Luke was currently admiring here in my bedroom seemed like taking Gordon Ramsey to McDonald's for a dinner date by comparison.

"Mm. Your copy of Dante." Luke ran his fingertips down the book's broken spine while I hooked my bra behind my back. "Looks well-loved."

"It was," I assured him. "As you'll realize if you have a look at the front cover. That's the one I brought back from Italy with me. I think I left the iron on top of it at one point. You should still be able to see the burn marks."

Luke plucked the book from the shelf, checked it for scorching, and laughed. "Do you destroy everything you love, darling, or do just reserve that for me and your books?"

"Have I destroyed you already, Mr. Dawnstar?" I slipped my panties on and pulled them up over my hips. "I was sure I'd get at least another week or two out of you yet."

“I’m devastated by you every moment I don’t have my teeth on your neck, Mrs. Dawnstar.” Luke snorted as he traded my copy of *The Divine Comedy* for *Nancy Drew*. “Good God, woman. There are burn marks on this one too.”

“Some things never change,” I said with a shrug as I headed over to the mirror.

But as I stared down my reflection, I had to admit that wasn’t *entirely* true.

Now that I was Luke’s wife...

A few things had changed—in ways that it was getting harder and harder to ignore.

In my reflection, I could tell my eyes looked bigger than they used to be. Brighter, too. The colorless gray of my irises glimmered, almost iridescent when it caught in the stray rays of early morning sunshine slipping in through the windows. My eyelashes were thicker and darker. Lush. I almost looked like I was wearing fakes, but no—it was all me.

Then, there was my hair. It was huge and wild, which wasn’t the strangest thing for me in the morning, but it looked strangely elegant in its messiness. My blonde locks cascaded all the way down to my waist in thick, glossy waves.

I hadn’t had a bad hair day since marrying Luke.

I wasn’t sure that I ever would again.

Even my face looked slightly different these days. My cheekbones seemed higher somehow. My lips felt fuller. I’d always had pretty good skin, but pimples and dry spots were a thing of the past now. Instead, I had a healthy, faint pink flush to my face no matter what time of day it was. My pores looked practically airbrushed.

Add to that the fact that my sweat smelled faintly of roses even after a two-mile run with no deodorant on, and no matter how much I ate and drank, I didn’t seem capable of gaining so much as a pound on my wedding day weight...

Being with Luke was changing me. I could see it there before me, plain as day.

I could feel it too—something inside me that made me bolder. Sharper. More confident.

I still wasn’t sure why or how...but I wasn’t the same woman I’d been when I woke up in Luke’s bed just a few weeks ago.

I was becoming something new. Something I didn't have a name for yet.

I was half scared, half thrilled to learn what exactly it was.

"Oh, Evie..." Luke was still playing bookshelf archaeologist. "You didn't tell me you spent your high school years tits-deep in a goth phase."

I tore my gaze away from the mirror to glance across the room at Luke. He was holding my high school yearbook open—a sight which sent a flush of embarrassment roaring through my entire body.

"Oh, *God*." I raced over to grab the book from Luke, but he pulled it out of my reach just in time.

"*Evelyn St. John*," Luke read from the page he'd opened to. He pressed a hand against my shoulder to keep me at an arm's length while I swung and grabbed for the book. "All that eyeliner's a good look for you, love—though I think the white face powder and the pigtails are a little much."

"I was going through some stuff. Obviously." Anyone who wore as much eyeliner as I had at seventeen pretty much had to be. "Where did you find that? I thought I threw that out after graduation."

"Wedged between Shelly and Byron." Luke was smirking as he flipped through the yearbook's pages. "A good place for it. They're some of my favorites too, you know."

"Probably the biggest influence behind the goth phase, for that matter. Did you know them?" I asked—partly out of curiosity, partly to change the topic while I figured out how to casually pry my old yearbook from Luke's hands.

I'd talk literature with Luke all day if I could—especially if it meant we didn't have to discuss my teenage penchant for black fishnets and ankh necklaces.

"Of course. You and I had dinner with them several times." Another exciting aspect of belonging to Luke—our romance hadn't just played out on this lifetime. We'd fallen in love for the first time not long after the creation of the Earth itself—and every time I died, I came back so we could do it all over again. Luke could recall a thousand reincarnations of me, even if I didn't remember any of them myself. "Byron wouldn't stop trying to tempt you into bed with him, mind, but—" Luke shrugged. "*Poets*."

"Really?" I narrowed my eyes suspiciously, but my inner teenager was practically falling over herself to hear more.

“Who did you think ‘She Walks in Beauty’ was about?” Luke shifted his hand from my shoulder to twirl a lock of my hair between his fingers. “Your hair was darker that time around, of course, but you were still just as lovely.”

I took Luke’s distraction as an opportunity to lunge for the book again, but again, Luke lifted it up out of my reach as he read on.

“All-State track, drama club...band?”

Luke laughed as I groaned.

“I played the drums. Badly,” I admitted with a sigh. Trust Luke to find the most embarrassing item in an entire room full of my teenage angst and shame. “Sister Catharine, the band director, said that God blesses some of us with rhythm—and I must have wandered off when He was handing it out.”

“Nonsense,” Luke scoffed. “You have rhythm.”

I thought back to all the grueling hours I’d spent trying to perfect simple paradiddles and shook my head. “I’m afraid you’re mistaken, *darling*.”

Luke smirked. “She should have had you haul your snare drum into bed, then. You don’t seem to have any problem with it there.”

“Very funny.” I held my hand out for the book. “Are you done?”

“Almost.”

Luke’s smirk softened into a fond smile as he read out the final line beneath my picture in his dark, rolling English accent:

“The gates of hell are open night and day;

Smooth the descent, and easy is the way:

But to return, and view the cheerful skies,

In this the task and mighty labor lies.”

I put my hand over my face—but at least this time, I wasn’t just hiding a blush, but a grin as well.

“I was a very serious teenager,” I said with a little laugh. “It seemed... poignant at the time.”

“Your yearbook quote was Virgil, darling.” Luke finally tossed the book back onto the shelf where he’d found it and took me into his arms. “The Dryden translation, too. You really are mine.”

Luke kissed me slow and deep. It made every inch of my body sing in a satanic hallelujah—at least, until I saw the glimmer in Luke’s eyes as he pulled away.

“Now, I have to ask...”

I sighed, already sensing defeat. “You saw the talent show picture in the yearbook too, didn’t you?”

“Evie Sin and the Seraphim. A *very* good band name.” Luke glanced back at the yearbook. For a second, I thought he was going to crack it back open to the picture of me wailing into a microphone and crashing on my drum kit while my friends played guitar and bass on the school’s stage, but instead, he reached for the smaller book it had landed next to. “Huh.”

“Huh?” I turned away again to pull some fresh clothes out of my suitcase. Luke might have been hell-bent on going over every artifact of my adolescence he could find, but I really did want breakfast at some point. “What’d you find now? My middle school diary? Not to spoil it for you, but I had a crush on a hot seminarian, and he did *not* like me back.”

“His loss. Bloody idiot,” Luke scoffed. “But no, love. *Charlotte’s Web*.” He held it up for me to see. The book was practically falling apart at its spine, and its pages were wavy like it had been dropped in the bath a few times. Probably because it had been. “You seemed to love this one, too.”

“Of course I did.” I tugged a chunky gray sweater on over my head, then reached for a pair of jeans. “It was my favorite book as a kid.”

“I don’t suppose you remember where you got it?”

Luke was looking at me expectantly, but I only shrugged.

“It’s not a first edition like all of your books are,” I assured him. “And it’s certainly no *Margites*.” I still didn’t understand Luke’s fascination with my bookshelves when he literally had Homer’s famous lost comedy sitting on his nightstand back at home.

“You really don’t remember?”

I buttoned my jeans and shrugged. “My mom probably got it from a second-hand shop or a library book sale. That’s where most of the books are from. I think I read it the first time just before we went into witness protection. Why?”

“No reason.” Luke gave the book a sentimental smile as he placed it gently back on the shelf. “It’s a nice book, though. At least, until the end.”

“I never liked endings either,” I said. “That one, or any other. But unfortunately, everything good has to come to an end eventually.” Like Luke’s snooping expedition. I gave him a sharp smack on his gorgeous ass. “Get some clothes on, handsome. I want coffee.”

Luke grinned as he rubbed the handprint I'd left on his gorgeously shaped backside. "For you, love... Alas. Only if I must."

EVIE

The nostalgic smell of cheap, slightly scorched coffee greeted us as we finally headed downstairs. I could hear my mother on the phone in the living room while pancakes sizzled on the griddle, abandoned. The scent of almost-burned batter rose up from them along with a little smoke as we entered the kitchen.

Luke grabbed a spatula and gave the pancakes a flip while I went straight for the coffee. I was just about to grab some mugs when the kitchen door swung open, letting in a gust of wind and a flurry of snow from the outside.

“Morning, sleepy girl,” Dad grunted as he closed the door behind him. He wore a dirty gray jumpsuit and an ear-flap hat. A prickle of short, steel-colored hair poked out from beneath it. He was covered in snowflakes from the top of his hat to the soles of his boots. His keys clanked against the counter as he came over to press a kiss to my cheek. “You smell nice. Like flowers.”

I sniffed him back and smirked. “And you smell like you’re fresh out of work. How’s Woodstock’s finest garbage truck?”

“Gutsy Gerta’s still goin’ strong.” Dad moved behind Luke and clapped him on the shoulder—a little too hard. He had to reach up pretty high to do it, too. Luke was almost twice Dad’s height. “Hope you know you’re burning those, bucko.”

“I’m still learning, I’m afraid.” Luke turned and gave me a wink. “Hopefully my next batch will be better.”

It was sweet of Luke to take credit for Mom’s pancake mishap—especially since it wouldn’t win him any points with Dad. Dad knew well enough that when Mom’s phone rang, whatever she’d been doing at the time went up in smoke.

In this case, quite literally.

“How was work?” Luke shifted the burned pancakes onto a plate and started buttering up the griddle for a new set.

“Same as always,” Dad grunted. He gave Luke a scowl then moved for the mug cabinet. “You had coffee yet, princess?”

“I was just getting to that.” I picked up the coffee pot and closed my eyes as I breathed in its scent. Dirty, dark, and thick. Just the way I liked it. “Grab me something to pour it in?”

Dad opened the cabinet and carefully selected three mugs. The first two were from a trip he and Mom had taken to Atlantic City together when they were younger. The third, which he pushed toward Luke after I’d filled it, was Dad’s least favorite—I Heart NYC.

It was only ever used for guests Dad didn’t like.

Unfortunately, Luke and Dad hadn’t bonded quite as well this weekend as I would’ve liked.

I carried my mug over to the table and slipped into a seat. When I took a sip of my coffee, it was burning hot—but if I minded that, I wouldn’t have married Luke to begin with.

Given the way Dad was acting around Luke, I was beginning to suspect he would’ve preferred that I hadn’t.

“Your mother in there on the phone?” Dad jabbed his thumb toward the living room, and I nodded.

“Must be something juicy. I keep hearing her whooping and cackling.” Right on cue, another loud, sharp laugh sounded from the living room.

“You let her know if she decides to take over the pancake operation from Union Jack over there, I’ll be down for breakfast, princess.” Dad carried his coffee mug toward the stairs. “I’m gonna go grab a shower while I wait.”

Dad kicked his boots off into the ever-growing shoe pile next to the door, then stomped up the stairs. I didn’t miss the little scowl he gave Luke before he disappeared out of sight.

Meanwhile, Luke ladled out four fresh dollops of batter onto the griddle. He only turned to me when we heard the door to the upstairs bathroom close.

“I think your father doesn’t like me anymore, *princess*.” Luke leaned back against the counter. If Dad’s grumbling was getting to him, he didn’t show it. Luke looked confident as ever as he tipped a mouthful of coffee over his lips. “Wonder what I did to earn his ire. I do hope I deserve it.”

“Don’t tease.” I leaned back in my chair, tucked my feet up beneath me, and took a sip from my mug. “I warned you, didn’t I? It’s the sound of our nocturnal shenanigans he doesn’t like.”

“And here I thought he’d be happy to know I’m performing my husbandly duties.” Luke sliced off a pat of butter and topped the burned pancakes with it, followed by a drizzle of syrup.

“You don’t have to eat those, you know,” I warned him as he searched the drawers for a fork. “They’re hardly up to your epicurean standards.”

“Waste not, want not.” Luke hacked off a bite with the side of his fork.

He was just about to put it in his mouth when my mother rushed in. Her eyes were wide with excitement. A huge grin was plastered across her face.

“The two of you will never believe—” Mom stopped dead in her tracks as she spotted the charred bite of pancake Luke was about to consume. “Oh, Luke! Don’t you dare eat that, you silly boy.”

“It’s fine, Mrs. St. John,” Luke insisted, but Mom swiped the fork and plate both out of his hands anyway.

“Don’t be ridiculous. We don’t eat burned food in this house. If you’re that hungry, you can have the first of this next batch—which you are *such* a dear for starting for me.” Mom scraped the plate into the trash and took up her spot at the stove once more. “And don’t call me Mrs. St. John, sweetheart. You’re part of the family now. Might as well start acting like it.”

“Who was on the phone, Mom?” I moved to the cupboard and grabbed her a coffee cup. “Must have been something important.”

“Well...” Mom glanced over at me, a mischievous little smile on her mouth. “I should really wait for your father to get back before I spill the beans. Did I hear him come in?”

“He made himself scarce pretty quick. He’s up showering now.” I looked at Luke and frowned. “I don’t think he’s warmed up to Luke as

much as I originally thought he would.”

Mom let out a laugh. “He’s just being a dad, hon. You should have heard him when you first told us about the wedding. He loved Luke immediately. Started planning for hunting trips, ice fishing...”

“We’ll have to go next time we’re back.” Luke reached out to brush my hip with his knuckles. “I wouldn’t mind seeing you all pink-cheeked out on a frosty lake.”

“Assuming that Dad doesn’t try to push you in and hold you under.” I turned to Mom. “What changed?”

Mom chuckled as I took a sip of my coffee. “The two of you are pretty...*active*, sweetie. And loud, for that matter.”

I froze mid-sip and swallowed hard. The coffee burned all the way down. “Oh.”

Luke wasn’t going to have to haul me out to any lake now. I was pink-cheeked enough to fry eggs on.

The sex. Of course that was it.

I was too mortified to say anything further, but Luke didn’t seem fazed by it.

“We’ll be more considerate in the future.” Luke’s eyes traveled up and down my body so hungrily, I was glad Mom was too busy flipping the pancakes to notice. “Our apologies, Mum. Truly.”

“Oh. *Mum*.” Mom giggled again, just like a schoolgirl. “Oh, I like that a lot. But you don’t need to apologize, Luke, sweetie. I imagine Jim’s just still getting used to the idea that his little girl is finally married, is all.”

“Still...” I glanced up toward the stairs, where the muffled hiss of the shower was thankfully drowning out this conversation for Dad. “We’ll have to apologize to him before we head out tonight.”

“No, honey, you don’t worry about that.” Mom’s spatula scraped against the griddle as she flipped the pancakes onto a fresh plate. She offered it to Luke with a wily smile. “If we want grandchildren someday, your father will just have to accept that there’s only one way to happen.”

For a second time, Mom caught me with a mouthful of coffee at the worst possible moment.

This time, I nearly did a spit-take.

“Grandchildren?” I coughed after I’d forced the coffee down. “Luke and I haven’t even been married a full month yet, Mom.”

I didn't even know if Luke could *have* children, let alone if he wanted them.

To secure Luke's protection from the angels who wanted me dead, our marriage had been rushed. I hadn't even been able to give Luke an *I love you* outside of the bedroom yet. The conversation about our future—including having children—was one that we had yet to find time for.

Hell. I didn't even know if *I* wanted kids yet.

But whatever the right time to discuss that possibility was, it wasn't now. And it *certainly* wasn't a discussion I was going to have in front of my mother.

"Maybe we should stay in for the rest of the day," I suggested to Luke. "We could watch a movie and table the hunting and fishing until Dad's cooled off a little bit. I don't think I want him anywhere near you with a gun right now."

Plus, if we were watching a movie, no one would be able to bring up the prospects of Luke and I making babies again.

"A movie sounds lovely," Luke agreed. He smeared a warm pat of butter across the top pancake, drenched them in syrup, and offered me a bite. "*Angels and Demons*, maybe? I've heard its good."

"Luke," I hissed at him beneath my breath. It was like he *enjoyed* teasing my parents with the bizarre truth of our reality.

I knew Heaven and Hell, angels and demons, all really existed. I'd seen it all first-hand.

But we hadn't exactly figured out how to explain any of that to my parents yet.

Luke stopped my protests by pushing a mouthful of buttery, syrup-soaked pancake between my lips.

I scowled as I chewed the sweet, fluffy pancake.

Luke only smirked.

I hoped he was enjoying himself.

In fact, knowing Luke, he usually was.

"I'll make popcorn!" my mother chirped, completely oblivious. "What time are you two leaving tonight?"

"Just before dinner, I think," Luke said. "We have plans in Vegas that I'm afraid we can't break."

"Aw. That's a shame." My mother turned to Luke with a gentle pout. "I was gonna make baked ziti with garlic bread."

“We’d stay longer if we could,” Luke assured her. “I’m sure your ziti al forno is delicious.”

“It really is, Luke,” Mom said casually—but I could tell that the gears in her head were already turning with temptation on her mind. “Maybe you could cancel your other plans? We could open that nice bottle of wine you two brought us, watch the big game...”

“We’re meeting with some of Luke’s...work friends, Mom.” I grabbed a napkin to wipe the syrup from my lips. It helped disguise my frown.

Luke may have been CEO of Adversary Industries, but his work friends weren’t just any old account executives.

We were having dinner at the Inferno with the Fallen—the six angels who had rebelled against Heaven along with Luke. It wasn’t something that I was exactly looking forward to. I knew very little about the Fallen—except that they were all very powerful—and even less about what to expect.

It didn’t matter. I was married to the King of Hell now, and as Luke’s bride, I would have to become queen as well. Whether I liked it or not, we had a coronation to plan. Apparently, we needed the Fallen’s help to do that, though I still didn’t know why.

“That’s such a shame.” Mom hummed thoughtfully as she set up another stack of finished pancakes. She obviously wasn’t giving up on us spending another night without a fight. “We could watch the *National Treasure* movies too if you stayed longer, you know. They’re your father’s favorites.”

“That Nic Cage is a funny guy,” my father grumbled as he clomped back down the stairs in his slippers and robe. He went straight to my mother, wrapped his arms around her, and pressed a kiss firmly to her cheek. “Pancakes smell good, butter. Much better than Mr. God Save the Queen’s attempt.”

“*Butter?*” Luke leaned over to whisper in my ear.

“Her name’s Patsy,” I whispered back to him with a little laugh. My parents were a little dorky, but even after more than a quarter of a century together, they were still very much in love. “Patsy—Pat—pat of butter.”

Luke chuckled, but said nothing more on the matter.

“Oh, sprinkles!” My mother rubbed her cheek against Dad’s. “You’re here! I’ve got some *very* big news—can’t believe I almost forgot.”

Luke gave me another look.

“Sprinkles are called *jimmies* here on the East Coast sometimes,” I explained under my breath. “Jim—Jimmy—*jimmies*—sprinkles.”

Luke chuckled again. “They’re sweet together.”

I rolled my eyes and stole Luke’s fork for another bite of pancake. “This isn’t even the half of it.”

“What’s the news, then?” Dad took his plate of pancakes to the table. “England invading us again?”

“I think we learned our lesson on that last time,” Luke quipped as he joined Dad at the table. “So much tea dumped in Boston harbor...we wouldn’t chance that twice.”

“Oh, shush, you two.” Mom shooed me toward the table as well. She didn’t speak again until I was sitting in the chair between Dad and Luke. “Now, the reason I was on the phone earlier... Well, it was one of those fancy quiz contests, if you must know.”

Dad and I gave each other a tired look.

“Butter...” Dad groaned.

“You know those things are scams, Mom.” I tried not to roll my eyes. Mom always meant well, but her kind heart was a little too gullible for this world sometimes. “C’mon. We’ve talked about this. You didn’t give them your credit card number, did you?”

“Nope. Just my email address.” Mom braced herself against the counter and wiggled her shoulders with delight. “Ask me how I did. Quick, before I ruin the surprise and just tell you.”

“How did you do, Mum?” Luke asked politely. There was a little knowing smile on his lips that I didn’t quite trust.

Between Luke’s smile and my mother’s grin, I wasn’t sure who looked more suspicious—but I suspected I was about to find out.

“I *won*, Luke!” Mom threw her arms out wide, flinging a little bit half-cooked pancake batter off the spatula and against the wall.

“You don’t say.” Luke got up to grab a towel. He didn’t sound surprised. “What was it about?”

“It was all Billy Joel questions! Can you think of anything more perfect?”

“For you? Nothing more perfect in the world,” Luke agreed as he wiped the wall clean of the batter. I wasn’t sure if he was just indulging her or if she’d managed to mention to him that Billy Joel was her favorite

artist at some point when I wasn't paying attention—but either way, I wished he'd stop.

"Patsy..." Dad put his face in his hands and sighed. "You can't keep trusting these damn telemarketers. Remember what happened last time?"

"I still think that was Publisher's Clearing House," Mom insisted. "The check just got lost in the mail, is all."

"I'm sure it did," Luke agreed as he placed the towel back down on the counter. He was still smiling gently as he slipped back into his seat. "You must be a very lucky woman."

I gave Luke a stern look. Mom had a bad habit of falling for gifts exactly like this one. At least she hadn't given them her card number this time...but Luke hardly needed to encourage her.

"Mom, if you won this Billy Joel quiz situation, then where's your prize?" I asked.

"Oh, Evie, that's the best part!" Mom bounced happily on the balls of her feet as she joined us at the table. "We got free plane tickets—two of them! To anywhere in the world we want to go. They already emailed me the gift certificates—and before any of you start doubting me, I already checked that they work."

"Evie and I have been talking about taking a trip somewhere ourselves, you know," Luke said. He didn't mention that it would be to wherever we decided my coronation should take place. "Perhaps we should consider a family vacation. The timing is convenient."

"Yes," I said slowly, narrowing my eyes. Suddenly, Luke's smile was making a little too much sense. "Yes, it is."

"Oh, that would be wonderful!" Mom clapped her hands together, beaming. "I only wish we'd won four tickets instead of just the two!"

"Evie and I are more than capable of paying our own way," Luke assured her.

"At least those deep pockets of yours are good for something," Dad grumbled as he dug into his pancakes. "Where are you dragging us to, then?"

"We'll have to think on it for a little longer." Luke gaze lingered on me. "I was thinking Paris might be nice. You'll have spring break off from work, won't you, Mum?"

Dad coughed gruffly through his mouthful of pancakes, scowling, but Mom's face lit up even more.

“Oh, that would be *lovely*,” Mom gushed. “Can you imagine? We could do Easter Mass at Notre Dame!”

“We’ll look into it,” Luke said. He stole his fork back from me and finally took a bite of pancakes for himself. “Mm. These are wonderful, Mum.” He turned his gaze toward me again as he licked the syrup from his lips. “Completely perfect in every way.”

“Oh, Luke.” Mom blushed and tried to fight back her grin as she waved his praise away. “*You’re* perfect.”

Dad gnashed his teeth against his fork grumpily and I rolled my eyes.

Luke *was* perfect. That was the problem.

Too perfect, in fact.

“WAS THAT YOUR DOING, THEN?” I asked as I took a dripping plate from Luke at the sink after breakfast.

“Whatever do you mean?” He plunged another plate into the soapy water. It sloshed inside the sink, a little wave of evergreen-scented suds.

“The plane tickets, Luke.” I flicked my fingers at him, sending a few droplets of water flying toward his scruffy cheek. “You’re really too clever to be playing dumb with me.”

“Is it really so impossible to imagine that your mother just happened to win them?” he asked, keeping his eyes focused on the sponge as he swirled it around the plate. “Stranger things have happened, I’m sure.”

He was playing his part well, it was true. But as soon as I saw the little smile tugging at the corner of his mouth, I knew I had him.

“You bastard.” I laughed and swatted at his shoulder. “It *was* you.”

“How did you know?”

“Apart from the way you can’t stop smirking when you’re pleased with yourself?”

“Yes.” Luke turned to me, full smirk engaged. “Apart from that.”

“When strangers call the house, Mom only ever loses money, Luke,” I explained. “She always sees the best in people. She’s always full of hope.”

“That’s not a bad thing,” Luke mused. “Hope is the most precious thing we have, love.”

“Yeah, well, those so-called Publisher’s Clearing House people made her buy five hundred dollars’ worth of Amazon gift cards so they could ‘pay for shipping fees’.” I shook my head. “You shouldn’t have encouraged her like that.”

“There was no other way to ensure that your parents could come to your coronation,” Luke explained. “You’ve seen your father around me. He wouldn’t have taken my money for tickets.”

I blinked. “You really want them to come to the coronation, then?”

“We’ll have to explain a few things to them, but if they already have grandchildren on the mind...” Luke shrugged. “Any child of ours will be half-angel, Evie. That comes with certain...complications.”

Suddenly, my mind was full of visions of a cute, chubby baby with black bat wings.

“Such as?” I asked, a little tense.

“Recall the fire you can conjure in your hands now?”

I glanced around to make sure that Mom and Dad weren’t lingering in the doorway to the kitchen, then summoned a flame into the palm of my hand. It was no bigger than what a match could create and burned a pale orange. I closed my hand, extinguishing it before I set off the smoke alarm—or before my parents walked in and saw.

“Good girl,” Luke said with a nod. “Now imagine a baby sneezing a flame ten times that size.”

My mouth fell open. “You really think—”

“I suspect your parents will find out about my true nature sooner or later,” Luke said. He handed me another clean plate to dry. “Might as well be sooner.”

“Because...you want to have a baby someday.” Just saying it made my stomach flutter and my chest go tight all at once.

“I would, love.” Luke let the water out of the sink and turned to me as he dried his hands. “Wouldn’t you?”

I pursed my lips and looked away.

That answered two of my questions, then. Yes, Luke wanted a child. From me. And if he wanted one, it suggested that he at least *believed* it was possible.

But as far as what I wanted...

“I’ve still got this birth control implant in,” I reminded him. “So we’d need to get it out before we even started trying.”

“I recall.” Luke’s gaze didn’t stray from me. For far from the first time, it felt like he was staring straight through my skin into my soul. “But that’s not what I asked, love.”

“I know.” I sighed as I dried the plate. “But...if I’m being honest...”

“You don’t need to lie,” Luke said. He slipped the plate from my fingers and put it into the cabinet. His eyes stayed glued to me the entire time. “Not to me.”

“I don’t know yet, Luke,” I finally admitted. “I’ve never even considered it before just now. Can we...table this, maybe? We’ve still got the coronation to sort out, I need to meet your friends—”

“The Fallen,” Luke corrected me. “I don’t know that I’d necessarily call them my friends.”

“See? There’s a lot of other stuff to worry about.” Meeting the Fallen tonight was quickly becoming the least of my worries—and we hadn’t even made it back to Vegas yet. “*Especially* now that I know you want me to tell my parents about your...”

“Condition?” Luke supplied, arching an eyebrow.

“Your *devilishness*, Luke. Dad’s already got it in for you, and you heard Mom going on about Easter Mass at Notre Dame. She’s Catholic to the bone.”

“Good.” Luke took my towel from me and tossed it aside, then placed his hands on my hips and drew me against him. “Then she already believes.”

“That’s only half the battle,” I said as Luke lowered his lips down toward mine.

He kissed me, slow and firm. His tongue slipped into my mouth, still tasting of butter, coffee and syrup.

When he pulled away again, I was breathless.

Kissing Luke tended to have that effect on me.

“Sometimes, love,” he said softly, “half the battle is all you need.”

EVIE

We left my parents' house that evening, with just enough time to follow the sunset all the way back to Vegas.

"Doesn't it bother you, flying into the sun?" I asked Luke through the mic on my headset. Even though I wore my Elvis sunglasses, I still couldn't look up ahead of us too comfortably.

Luckily, Luke was just as nice to look at as any sunset I'd ever seen.

"I always had a fondness for Icarus." Luke's voice was pumped into my ear through the big, black headphones that covered both my ears. "Not my domain, of course, but his pride—his fall..."

"A man after your own heart," I teased. "I think this weekend might have called the true nature of your pride into question, though."

"Did it?" Luke arched a brow. "No one has ever questioned that sin of mine before."

"You didn't have to stay at my parents' house with me," I pointed out. "In that tiny bed... You barely fit in it. I know your feet were hanging off the end every night."

"Any bed that you're in is a bed well worth sharing, love."

"But you could have insisted on a hotel. Or an Airbnb. Somewhere more appropriate for the King of Hell—and somewhere where you wouldn't have had to deal with Dad scowling at you for two whole days, for that matter."

Luke glanced over at me. "Should I have?"

“No.” I hugged myself gently and found myself smiling. “You put up with everything just so I could spend time with my parents, and you didn’t complain once.”

“It was important to you.” Luke said it so matter-of-factly—like another option had never even occurred to him.

“Well, it was...kind of you.” I adjusted the cling wrap on the plate of baked goods Mom had insisted on sending back with us. Devil’s food cake with chunks of marshmallows and fudge. I’d been mortified for a second when she’d pushed them into Luke’s hands—did she already somehow *know* who Luke really was?—but Luke had only laughed. “I’m aware of how...how *much* they can be.”

“They were lovely, Evie.” Luke glanced down at his controls, then steered us a little more southward. “We have a lot in common, your parents and I.”

“Do you?” I arched an eyebrow. “You *did* hear Dad call you a tea-sucker over lunch today, right?”

“They adore you, Evie. As do I.” Luke shifted a hand from the control wheel and laid it on top of mine. When he squeezed my fingers, my stomach fluttered. It was incredible, how he could still give me butterflies. “Now. How are you feeling about tonight?”

I took a deep breath and licked my lips.

“Nervous,” I said honestly.

Even with all Dad’s grumpiness, if meeting my parents had been a test of Luke’s charms, he’d passed with flying colors.

He’d finally met my family in person.

Tonight, I’d finally be meeting his.

At least, as much as a group of fallen angels counted as family, I supposed.

“You don’t need to be nervous,” Luke said with confidence. “You have nothing to prove to the Fallen. They’ll be eager to meet you—and I’m equally as eager to show you off. We’ll get you a pretty dress from Indulgence and a new pair of Louboutins—”

“You talk about it like it’ll be a fashion show, Luke.” I sighed as I felt my chest tighten. “But I feel like I’m going into battle.”

“Then we’ll get you some war paint as well.” Luke glanced over to wink at me as he withdrew his hand again. “Always liked you in a red lip. It brings out the loveliest colors in your eyes.”

“What are they like?” I dodged the compliment as best I could. Luke obviously adored lavishing me with praise, but it was still taking a little getting used to. “If we’re going to war, I’d like to at least know my enemy.”

“They’re not your enemy,” Luke corrected me. Then, he sighed as well. “But...you do have a point.”

“There are six of them, right?” I’d gleaned a little knowledge from Luke and his cohort of demons at the Inferno over the last few weeks, but as far as I was concerned, it was far from enough. “The six angels who were tossed out of Heaven with you when you challenged Gabriel about humans having free will.”

“You’ve been paying attention. Good girl.” As Luke praised me, I had to clench my knees together a little tighter. *Good girl*...it never failed to make me at least a little wet. “There are six, yes. They’ve been loyal to me from the beginning—and I suspect until the end as well.”

I nodded and felt the tightness in my chest ease up a little.

Loyal was good. It made me feel a little more confident about tonight.

“So you trust them?” I asked.

Luke laughed. “I didn’t say that.”

“But if they’re loyal—”

“Loyal, yes. But they’re still former angels, love. You’re right to want to be careful around them. They’re all very powerful, and they all have their own ideas about how Hell should be run—among other things.”

“Like?”

“Everything from the ultimate fate of humanity to whether or not it’s acceptable to wear white after All Saint’s Day.”

“They’re snobs, then,” I guessed. That explained why Luke wanted me all gussied up in expensive shoes and a new dress.

“Some,” Luke agreed. “But not all. Moloch, you’ve already met.”

“Definitely not a snob.” Lock had a Scottish brogue, a penchant for bar brawls, and a fondness for my friend Joan—though I still couldn’t figure out if they were fucking, fighting, or both. “But maybe a little bit of a hothead.”

“His temper has its place. He’s a fierce warrior as well.” Luke nodded gently. “Lock, we can trust wholly. He doesn’t play games, and he’s dependable. Predictable, even. When war is on the horizon, he always

votes to go out fighting. No matter how badly the odds are stacked against us.”

“I didn’t realize Hell was a democracy.” It was hard to imagine Luke calling a vote on anything. He always listened to my opinions—at least, he had so far—but no matter what happened, we always seemed to get exactly where Luke wanted to go in the end.

“In its own way, it is. But this helicopter is still a proper monarchy, I’m afraid.” Luke turned his head to give me a stern look. “You should rest, love. You’ll be dining with the dukes of Hell tonight—and they tend to stay up late.”

“But I want to know about the others,” I protested. When Luke and I had gotten married, obedience had been part of our vows. But so far, he’d been very careful about when he gave me direct orders. “And I’m not even...”

My words were cut off as a yawn left my throat.

“Tired?” Luke suggested.

I waved his word away and closed my eyes.

Now that Luke mentioned it, my eyelids *were* feeling a little heavy. The gentle hum of the headset in my ears was the perfect sound for falling asleep to.

Even if it was only for the rest of the ride.

“Just tell me you love me,” I mumbled as I turned toward Luke to cuddle against the seat. “And don’t be smug about it.”

“Now and forever,” Luke purred. “Sweet dreams, darling girl. I’ll wake you when we arrive.”

TRUE TO LUKE’S WORD, I slept the whole way back to Vegas. Luke’s hands brushed over my breasts as he unbuckled my seatbelt, awakening me after we’d touched down. The sound of the chopper powering down replaced the headset’s soft hum as Luke slipped it away from my ears.

“Feeling rested?” he asked as his lips hovered over mine.

“Mm.” I leaned forward and helped myself to a kiss. Luke’s mouth was the perfect thing to wake up to. His tongue against mine was warm and sweet as any dream.

“I’ll take that as a yes.” Luke took the cookies from my lap and handed them off to Charon, who stood waiting by the chopper on Luke’s side

wearing white gloves and a black suit. “Put those somewhere safe, Charon. Have one, if you like. I suspect they’re excellent.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty.” Charon lifted the plastic wrap, selected a cookie, and bit into it—then chuckled. “Devil’s food cake? A bit on the nose.”

“That’s what I thought,” I mumbled sleepily. “Maybe Mom’s already found you out.”

“I suspect your mother is far sharper than anyone gives her credit for,” Luke agreed. “Loop your arms around my neck, love. I’ll carry you.”

“I can walk,” I said—but Luke had already slipped his arms around my back and beneath my knees.

Walking was apparently an annoyance that only other mortals needed to worry about. With Luke, I was pretty sure I could have gotten away with being carried from one luxury to the next for the rest of my life.

I clung to him tightly as he swept me away to the elevator. Charon followed us with the cookies and our bags.

“Where’s Phlegyas?” I asked Luke as the elevator doors opened. Normally, Luke’s gray-haired elevator operator was waiting to greet us with a bow and a warm smile, but tonight, he was absent.

“I’m not sure,” Luke said. “Charon?”

“I’ll look into it,” Charon promised. He took Phlegyas’s place at the buttons instead. “Ninth floor?”

“Eighth,” Luke said. “We need to go up to Illusion if we’re going to find something suitable for my bride to wear tonight.”

Up. I smiled against Luke’s chest as Charon pressed the button and the doors eased closed again.

From The Strip, Luke’s Inferno looked like any other fancy hotel. But when you got inside it, things were actually a little more topsy-turvy than they appeared. The entire building was actually inverted, dipping beneath The Strip right into Hell itself.

Nine levels of pleasure and delight, plus the rooftop so Luke could fly me between Hell and Earth. Thinking about the mechanics of it too hard made my head hurt, but I had to admit there were worse places for me to spend the rest of my life with Luke.

He’d built this place for me. To amuse me, to appease me...to keep me occupied while we figured out how to stop all the angels in Heaven from murdering me in this life like they had in all my others.

Which meant that Illusion, which I hadn't visited yet, was probably going to be just as ridiculously opulent as everything else Luke had to offer.

On the eighth floor, the elevator doors opened to the scent of soft leather and vanilla. Beyond them was a shopping mall—just, not like any mall I'd ever been in.

Before Luke, I'd dressed in vintage thrift store finds mostly—or barring that, whatever I could scrounge up off of eBay.

It only took a glance for me to realize this place was all designer.

"Luke..."

"Yes, love?" Luke placed me back down on my feet outside the elevator. If I hadn't been wearing the Gucci sneakers that Luke had gifted me, I would have felt like my feet were too poor to even touch the tile of this place.

Actually, the Guccis didn't help much.

"Need I remind you that I'm a grad student?" Before Luke, I'd always paid my own way. Given that I was on an academic's stipend, though...that usually didn't amount for much. "I can't afford anything here."

"You're also my wife," Luke reminded me. "You don't pay for anything anymore. Especially not here."

"I'm not shoplifting, either," I warned him. Just because I was married to the Devil didn't mean I wanted to turn into a petty thief.

Luke chuckled and took my hand. "You don't have to. I own this building, remember? Everything you see is already yours." He scoffed. "And even if it wasn't, I'd buy you anything you wanted anyway."

Luke led me through the rows of shops with purpose, but I lagged behind him, blinking sleepily and gawking at everything.

Apparently, what I already owned—through Luke—was a sex toy shop full of rose quartz dildos and a BDSM store with diamond-studded harnesses. Scattered beyond them were boutique shops for every major designer label I knew, plus several that were so high-end that I didn't even recognize them.

I saw a store full of dresses made entirely out of glass. I didn't even know how you were supposed to move in them once you had them on—but there were little glass slippers to match to complete a true Cinderella storybook look.

There was Chanel, Prada, Givenchy, and Dior. Every label I'd seen on the slender bodies of rich sorority girls during my undergrad. Every label that I'd always secretly wished that I too would be able to afford someday, knowing that as an academic, I probably never would.

And now...they were mine.

Being married to Satan certainly had its perks.

In a shop full of rococo-style ballgowns, I saw a beautiful woman with her hair piled high atop her head tighten the red ribbon tied around her throat as she reclined on a lounge chair. She reached for a piece of brioche from a platter of sweets laced with dark red cherries still on their stems. Attendants showed her gowns of every color, only for the woman to wave them each away.

As one of the attendants accidentally bumped into a man with a tray of champagne, the woman reached out to rap the attendant with her hand fan. A torrent of angry French followed. I didn't speak the language, but even I I could tell that every other word was a swear.

"Ah. Sweet *Madame Déficit*." Luke chuckled as he caught me staring at the scene. "Marie always did have a way of losing her head."

"Is that really..." I sighed as I realized I already knew the answer.

Of course Marie Antoinette was here in the Inferno. So were the souls of nearly every other person I'd ever read about in the history books.

Apparently, history was perfectly *stacked* with sinners. Probably, their sins were what had put them in the books in the first place.

"Come on." Luke pulled me toward another shop full of beautiful dresses. "You'll like these, I think."

"Alexandre Vauthier?" I checked one of the tags as we passed a rack and tried not to look at the price—just the name. "Never heard of him."

"The labels don't matter, darling," Luke said. "Only how you'll look in them. Champagne?"

A redheaded attendant arrived at our side with a bottle of bubbly and two glasses on a tray. She handed the champagne to Luke, who waved away the champagne flutes. Apparently, we were drinking straight from the bottle tonight.

"Do beautiful women appear to offer you champagne everywhere you go, Luke?"

Luke shrugged. "Sometimes. Does it bother you?"

"No, but—"

Luke snapped his fingers, and suddenly the woman with the champagne was a gorgeous redheaded man instead. He smiled at me and bowed low, like I was already his queen.

“Better?” Luke asked.

“How—” I clamped my jaw shut before I could finish the question.

I knew how.

Luke’s powers knew no bounds.

Luke took me to a little platform inside the store with mirrors all around on side of it. As he helped me up onto it, it felt like he was literally putting me on a pedestal.

Maybe he was.

“ALL RIGHT, LOVE.” Luke pressed the champagne bottle into my hands then. “Let’s get you undressed.”

“You’re really going to strip me down here, out in the open?” I asked, gripping the bottle. It was cold and slick with condensation beneath my fingers. “Can’t wait to get me back to bed first, huh?”

“You have a lovely body, Evie. Certainly too good to hide beneath all these clothes.” Luke checked his watch, then stepped up onto the platform behind me with purpose. “Have a sip of champagne and let me do the rest. I’m afraid we won’t have time for what you’re imagining...but I won’t pretend I won’t enjoy looking at you anyway.”

I glanced down at the bottle. Its label was in French and looked incredibly old.

Normally, drinking before dinner seemed a little gauche to me. But if I was really going to go head to head with Luke’s Fallen tonight, a little liquid courage probably wouldn’t hurt.

The champagne fizzed on my tongue as I tipped the bottle back against my lips. It was a rosé, sweet like cherries and fresh with herbs.

“We drank that on the eve of your last coronation,” Luke told me as I handed the bottle back to him. “Rosé des Riceys. From the cellars of Louis the Sixteenth himself.”

“Didn’t they chop his head off?” I touched my throat nervously as Luke placed the bottle down at the edge of the platform.

“Along with sweet Marie’s, yes.” Luke returned to his place behind me and pulled my t-shirt up over my head. “But that was the doing of the angels. Hardly the champagne’s fault.”

“The angels? Really?” I held my breath and closed my eyes as Luke reached around my hips to unbutton my jeans. I stepped out of my shoes while Luke pulled the denim down my thighs. “I kind of hoped that the French Revolution was one of your ideas. Peasants rising up to overthrow greedy monarchs—seems like exactly your kind of thing.”

“Usually, it is. But the angels do good from time to time. The world we live in isn’t entirely black and white, love.” Luke braced me so I wouldn’t lose my balance as I stepped out of my jeans. “Now. You wanted to know about the Fallen?”

“I did.” I clutched my arms around my body, still feeling a little exposed as Luke stepped off the platform in search of dresses. Luke might have thought my body was well worth displaying, but I was still getting used to the idea. Low self-esteem died hard, I guessed. “We covered Lock already. That leaves...” I wracked my brain for what I remembered of *Paradise Lost*. I’d already learned that Milton had gotten more right about the nature of creation than I’d previously imagined. “Beelzebub?”

“Zeb, if you like.” Luke brought over a few dresses from the racks and held them up to me. There was a light blue evening gown, a bright red cocktail dress and a revealing yellow number that I knew wasn’t the right color for me. He tossed them each aside carelessly as they failed to meet his expectations. “He’s technically my second-in-command. I understand he’s been keeping tabs on the angels in Paris for the last few months, so he should have a good idea of what to expect.”

“You really have your heart set on Paris, huh?”

Luke shrugged. “Maybe I just want to lick absinthe off your skin and fuck you in a *pied-à-terre* we can see the Eiffel Tower from.”

I laughed. “I’ll bet you do. What’s Zeb like, then? Anything like Lock?”

“More of a womanizer, unfortunately,” Luke admitted. The silk of the final dress he’d brought over swayed against my skin as he held it up against me. This one wasn’t right either, apparently. He threw it aside into the growing pile with all the others. “Keep an eye on him. If he tries to put his hand in your lap, break his fingers—or I’ll do it for you.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” I couldn’t imagine anyone having the gall to be so forward with me while Luke was around—but Zeb *was* a fallen angel, I supposed. “Who’s next. Maybe...Belial?”

“Bell is lovely, but as lazy as Milton wrote her.” Luke stepped down off the platform again to gather more potential gowns.

“Her?” I raised an eyebrow. That was a little off-canon. Milton’s Belial had been very much male. “Belial is a woman, then?”

“Usually. She seems to like herself best that way. She’ll be annoyed that I summoned her away from sunning herself in Marakesh, but you two usually get on well enough.” Luke carried over an armful of new selections and draped a vibrant pink number over my shoulder. “Ah. No. You’ll look like Brimstone Barbie in that.”

“What about Mammon?” I asked as Luke tossed the pink dress aside. “Is he as shrewd as Milton claimed?”

“Every bit,” Luke said. “And a dirty old man to boot. He’s the CFO of Adversary Industries, so he’ll probably want to talk business a bit. Just don’t let him get anywhere near your feet.”

“My feet?” I pressed my fingers to my lips as I laughed. “I don’t remember the bit about Mammon being a foot fetishist in Milton’s verse.”

“Milton’s feet weren’t nearly as lovely as yours.” Luke threw the rest of the dresses on the floor, then knelt down to slip my socks off. “Let’s table the dresses for a moment. I promised you Louboutins.”

“As long as you don’t go throwing them across the room too,” I warned him. “They’re too expensive to scuff.”

“Money is a social construct, love,” Luke assured me. “And nothing is too expensive when it comes to you.”

Thankfully, the shoes were easy to select. Luke only brought back one pair for me. The heels were a little daunting—six inches at least—but the soft white leather fit around my foot like they’d been made for me.

Combined with the classic red bottoms, I couldn’t pretend the effect wouldn’t be striking when we finally left the room tonight.

“There,” Luke said. “Perfect. Now, the dress...I think something black or white might work best.”

“Whatever you say, Mr. Dawnstar.” Luke’s eye for fashion was certainly more refined than my own. I was perfectly happy to let him make the decisions in this department. He seemed to know what he was doing a lot better than I did. “That just leaves...Mulciber, right? The famous angelic architect.”

“You’ll like him,” Luke called out over his shoulder as he disappeared in search of dresses once more. “And he always loves you.”

“Oh?” I put my hands on my hips and looked at my body in the mirror while Luke was away. It wasn’t just my face that was looking more glamorous these days, as it turned out. My breasts were fuller, my hips were wider, and my waist...I placed my hands on either side of it and found that my fingers nearly met in the middle. *Incredible*. “Why’s that?”

Luke returned with only two dresses and a smile.

“Because he’s been building a palace for you to live in since you and I met in Eden.”

“He built the Inferno, then?” I hadn’t even visited every level here yet, but I had to admit that I was already a fan of Mulciber’s work.

“Yes, but that’s not what I’m talking about. The Inferno is a vacation. Pandemonium, in the center of Hell, will be our home.”

“Wait.” I furrowed my brow in confusion as Luke moved behind me again. “There’s more of Hell?”

“Of course there is. And Pandemonium is its crown jewel—as much as you are.” Luke dipped his lips against my neck and lingered there. “It’s a long-term project, of course—with the angels to contend with, I’ve always lost you before we’ve been able to move in. But this time...there’s something different about this time.”

“Here’s hoping.” I closed my eyes and leaned back against Luke’s body for a moment. I didn’t like the idea of dying any more than Luke liked the idea of losing me. Being close to him like this...it felt too good to miss out on. “I suppose Mulciber will want me to pick out drapes, then. That should be a laugh.”

“Paint colors, actually,” Luke said. I felt smooth, soft fabric slide over both my shoulders. When I opened my eyes, I found both of the dresses Luke had chosen positioned over my body. One white, one black. “Which do you prefer?”

“I thought the world wasn’t all black and white,” I teased.

“Very funny.”

“Aren’t I always?” I studied the dresses for a moment, but another question caught in my brain before I could decide. “Why can’t we just live here, though? You created the Inferno to have everything we need.”

“I did,” Luke agreed, “But it’s hardly childproofed.”

I laughed. “*Very* funny. Is that what Mulciber’s paint swatches are for, then? A nursery?”

“If you like.” Luke’s smile was gentle in our reflections. Almost... wistful, in a way. “Though, I suppose I should wait until you’re ready to admit how much you love me first.”

My smile shifted to match Luke’s.

When the world was quiet and there was nothing else on my mind, he was all I thought about. He was the first thing on my mind when I woke up every morning, and the last thing I thought about before I drifted off to sleep at night.

He was even there in my dreams, every one more beautiful than the last.

“I suppose you should,” I said softly.

If only Luke knew how close I was to finally admitting it to him.

I just had to get up the courage to admit it to myself first.

“So. Black or white?” Luke asked again.

“White,” I said with a nod. “It’ll match the shoes.”

“Good.” Luke tossed the black dress aside. “When I tear it off you later, it will remind me of our wedding night.”

“That’s still the plan then?” I turned to face him and wrapped my arms around his neck.

“Isn’t it always?”

“You have a one-track mind, Luke Dawnstar.” I brushed my lips against his—not a kiss, but not *not* a kiss either.

“When it comes to you, love...” Luke pressed his lips firmly against mine. “Why the fuck would I ever need think of anything else?”

EVIE

Before we left Indulgence, Luke and I stopped by a make-up counter for the red lipstick he'd promised me. The attendant slicked the color across my lips, creamy and silky smooth.

"There. War paint." I turned to Luke so he could see the results. "How does it look?"

He grinned. "Like fresh blood."

I popped up on my tiptoes to blot it against Luke's cheekbone with a kiss.

It marked him, a perfect imprint of my lips, and he didn't move to wipe it away.

"Ah. Now we're both ready." Luke took my cheeks in his hands and placed a softer kiss on my mouth, careful not to smudge my lipstick. "Still nervous?"

I looked down at my dress. It clung to my body like a second skin all the way down to my knees. The skirt wasn't beaded or sequined, but when I shifted from side to side, the fabric glimmered ethereally.

The dress was low-cut too, so there was no pretending that my tits—arguably my best asset now—looked anything short of incredible.

Incredible enough to appease Luke's Fallen, though?

I supposed if my tits failed me, my stunning personality would have to bridge the gap.

“A little,” I admitted. I placed my hand in Luke’s. He lifted it up and twirled me once. When the world stopped spinning, I ended up in his arms.

“Don’t be.” Luke took my hand and curled around his arm. “Looking like that, it’s the Fallen who should be nervous of you.”

“We’ll see, I guess.” I pushed my shoulders back, squared my jaw, took a deep breath, and nodded. “All right, darling. Let’s dine with demons in Hell.”

PHLEGYAS WAS STILL MISSING from his post when we got to the elevator. It was empty—but apparently, Luke wasn’t above pushing the button on his own.

“Probably taking one of his vacation days,” Luke explained when he caught the look of worry in my eyes. “Stay focused. All that exists right now is you, me, and the gorgeous meal we’re about to eat.”

“And five fallen angels watching over us the entire time,” I added. It was hard to forget that I’d be facing down Luke’s most powerful comrades over dinner. “Do you think they’ll like me?”

“If they’re clever, they’ll love you,” Luke said. His tone didn’t waver, and his jaw was set like a general’s at the beginning of a death march. Whether that was reassuring or nerve-wracking, I still wasn’t sure. “And if they don’t love you, fuck them. They may be dukes, but I’m still king.”

Indulgence was on the Inferno’s third floor. I’d eaten my fair share of gorgeous food from its kitchens by this point, but so far, when I wasn’t at UCLA, Luke and I had been taking our meals in our room.

When I was here with Luke, it was hard to spend my time anywhere other than in bed. Eating was a secondary thing, only to be enjoyed between extensive lovemaking sessions so we’d have the energy to go another round.

I’d already tasted the food. It was good enough to make me salivate and flood my brain with dopamine just thinking about it.

Now, it was finally time to see where it all came from.

The doors opened on a lusciously dark room. The lights glowed golden, the glassware sparkled, and each of the round tables spread across Indulgence’s floor was impeccably ironed and starkly white.

A few finely dressed guests sat at the tables, laughing and drinking wine—but most were milling about like they were at some kind of cocktail

party, scarfing down entire legs of turkey and whole plates full of custard tarts as they schmoozed their way around the room.

“I can see why Dante called the third circle *gluttony* now.” My eyes lingered on a seemingly endless buffet as Luke led me past it. I loosened the grip I had on his arm slightly as my nose was filled with the scents of roasted meat, melted butter, garlic, ginger and sage.

“Dante only concerned himself with sin and punishment. This is Indulgence, Evie. There’s no guilt here. Only pleasure.” Luke slipped his arm out of my grasp and placed his hand against the small of my back instead, guiding me onward. “Still, don’t linger. The buffet is made of temptation itself. Once you start in on it, you might find yourself unable to stop.”

“I don’t think I’d want to,” I said mournfully. As we turned a corner, I craned my neck and struggled not to lick my lips as I watched the buffet slowly disappear out of sight. “It’s a shame that calories still count in Hell.”

“They don’t, actually,” Luke said with a small chuckle. “You could spend an entire week here eating nothing but filet mignon and cheesecake without gaining an ounce.”

“I guess I know what we’re doing next weekend.” I couldn’t tell if it was real, or just the temptation that dripped from every surface like hot fudge from a scoop of ice cream, but suddenly, I was ravenous.

It was a good thing we were holding this meeting over dinner. If I didn’t eat something soon, I wasn’t sure I could be trusted not to turn on Luke’s guests for sustenance.

Did fallen angel taste like chicken, I wondered?

If I was as dangerous in this dress as Luke seemed to think I was...

Hopefully, we wouldn’t have to find out.

Luke took me to a smaller room away from the other diners. Seven oak chairs with black velvet cushions were positioned around a large, round table already set with golden utensils, crystal goblets and jade-colored china plates.

“How gentlemanly of you, Mr. Dawnstar,” I purred as Luke brought me around the table and pulled out my chair for me.

“I do my best, Mrs. Dawnstar.” Luke leaned over to murmur against my ear as he pushed the chair back in beneath me. “But if you keep teasing me about it, I might change my mind and make you sit on my lap instead.”

When Luke took his seat, a waiter in black tailcoats and white gloves came over with two menus for us. They were made of a shiny black metal, etched with a curling cursive font embossed with white enamel.

I let my eyes slide over mine. I was prepared to see a dozen different foods that I'd never heard of before—but that couldn't have been further from reality.

"Pad Thai *and* lobster tail?" I raised my eyebrows, impressed. There were twelve items listed on the menu, and every single one of them was a favorite of mine. "Whoever your chef is, I like them a lot."

"If we're lucky, it's Bourdain tonight." Luke barely glanced at his menu before he set it aside.

I blinked. "You mean...*Anthony* Bourdain?"

"He moonlights here on occasion. When he feels like it." Luke barely glanced at his menu before he set it aside. "You can tell if you hear Sex Pistols blasting from the kitchens late at night."

"Wow. So, what are you getting?" I asked, curious. Luke's taste in food ranged from the decadently high-end to burgers and fries. "Pad Thai or lobster? I don't know that I can choose."

"Neither." Luke slid his menu toward me. "And it's a set menu. You don't have to choose here. You'll get both."

I ran my finger down items on Luke's menu and furrowed my brow. "Why is your menu different than mine? Doro wat... gamjatang... I've never even heard of most of these things."

"My menu has my favorites on it," Luke explained. He tapped his finger against his menu, then shifted it to mine. "Yours has yours."

"But...how did the waiter know?" It wasn't like I'd told the man that I had a craving for fried prosciutto tortellini or wontons in chili oil.

"It's not the waiter," Luke explained. "It's the restaurant itself. It anticipates your every desire, your slightest whim, and then it delivers."

"But *how*?" I should have learned by now that trying to figure out the magic of the Inferno was a lost cause, but this was beyond mind reading. My menu had items on it that I'd all but forgotten about loving. Like struffoli, which I'd only eaten once during a day trip to Naples. I'd fallen in love with it immediately, but I'd never been anywhere that served it since.

Until, apparently, now.

“The food is secondary, love.” Luke placed his hand on the back of my head and smoothed down the wild waves of my hair. “Don’t worry about it too much.”

“In that case, let’s switch menus.” I swapped Luke’s metal menu around with mine with a little smirk. “I want to try your favorites. You can try mine.”

“Cheeky girl.” Luke chuckled and gave me a nod. “I like how you think.”

The waiter returned a few moments later with our drinks, even though we hadn’t ordered any. Luke got two—a rocks glass of honey-colored whiskey, neat, and a wine so dark purple in color, it almost looked deep-ocean blue.

“It’s Greek,” Luke explained as he caught me staring at it. He swirled the wine around his glass, letting the color catch the light. “Ancient vintage. You can’t get it on Earth anymore.”

“I guess I know why Homer called it the wine-dark sea now.” I’d always heard it was because the Greeks hadn’t had the words to distinguish between dark red and dark blue in Homer’s time, but somehow, this made a lot more sense.

It was the exact color of salt waves at midnight. It made me think of battle and bloodshed—a drunken ocean churning a ship full of men toward their doom.

“Try it.” Luke offered me the glass, but I held up my hand and shook my head.

“I don’t think I should.” The swig of champagne I’d had in Illusion earlier was still buzzing in my head. I looked to my own drink—a frosty glass of something cloudy and white. When I took a sip of it, I was pleasantly surprised at the light sweetness. “See? I have coconut water. Indulgence doesn’t think I should be drinking either.”

“You’re worried you won’t be able to keep a level head with the Fallen if you drink,” Luke guessed.

“I’m worried that you and your satanic friends will drink me under the table in ten minutes flat if I try to keep up,” I corrected him. “You’ve got wine and whiskey in front of you already, and your guests haven’t even arrived yet.”

“Lock will have an entire bottle of Lagavulin finished before our first course arrives.” Luke reached for his whiskey, raised it to me, and took a

sip. "By comparison, this is moderation."

"They're not going to judge me for not drinking, are they?"

"Judge you? Not at all. Free will for all humans, love. It's what unites us all. Remember that." Luke placed his whiskey to the side and folded his hand over mine on top of the table. "Unfortunately, I'm no human. They'll expect me to go drink for drink."

"Can you even get drunk?" I'd never seen Luke have more than a glass or two of something strong at a time, so I supposed it was possible.

"Oh, yes," Luke assured me. He took a deep breath and nodded. He looked like he was bracing himself for a great ordeal. "I most certainly can."

I smiled. "That might be fun."

"You remember you said that when you're carrying me back up to our suite tonight." Luke moved his hand up to my cheek and turned my face towards his. "The Fallen will test us each tonight in their own ways, precious girl. Not out of malice, but because they'll think it's a good bit of fun. Stay strong for me—and stay on your toes. Don't let them get to you."

There it was: the real warning I'd been waiting for. It was kind of Luke to only give it to me now, moments before the Fallen arrived, instead of letting me worry about it all weekend...

I just hoped I'd do Luke proud.

Luke kissed me, quick and firm. As he drew away, I saw there was tension in his body. He had such a knack for looking at ease, even when he wasn't, that I hadn't noticed it before. But I could see it now.

It showed itself in the smallest of ways. The way he tapped twice against the table, then glanced at the door. The way he took two sips of his whiskey, instead of just the one.

I didn't know what happened if this meeting didn't go well. Luke had finally given me my warning, but he hadn't told me the stakes.

I placed my hand on Luke's knee beneath the table and gave him a little squeeze of confidence.

Whatever they were, we'd face them together.

Or, if we were very clever tonight, and very good...

Maybe we wouldn't have to face them at all.

Luke relaxed a little at my touch. By the time Lock's ruddy bronze beard and broad shoulders finally filled the doorway to the dining room, it was impossible to tell that Luke had been tense at all.

“Dawnstar! How are ye, ye smug auld bastard?” Lock’s handsome face broke out into a massive grin as he strode in. He wore a black kilt checked with red, a white shirt with loose sleeves and a black vest. His left eye was swollen shut and purple-green, like he’d just been in a fight.

From what I knew of Lock, he probably had.

“Lock. Good to see you.” Luke rose to embrace Lock, and I followed suit. “Where’d you get the shiner? Hunting angels again?”

“Nae. T’was the lass, Joanie. Evie’s friend.” Lock threw his arms out wide as he turned to me. “Give us a hug as well, won’t ye, beauty? But keep yer hands where I can see them—now that I ken ye human lassies can pack such a punch, I won’t make that mistake again.”

“I’ll do my best,” I promised. I wrapped my arms around Lock, and he gave me a hard squeeze back. He smelled like tobacco and scotch—but to my surprise, not in a bad way. “You should know better than to underestimate her by now, Lock.”

“Aye, well...” Lock rubbed the back of his head and shrugged. “It’s a lesson learned now, for sure. She’s a bonnie wee fighter, Evie. A fair friend for ye—and God help anyone she deems a foe.”

The waiter arrived with Lock’s menu and the bottle of whiskey that Luke had predicted. I wasn’t surprised when I saw haggis listed for Lock—but I was when I noticed he’d be having petit fours for dessert.

I supposed even a big, fierce warrior like Lock still knew how to enjoy the little things in life. I couldn’t help but wonder if Joan was among them. As much as they both enjoyed a good brawl, they would be a good match for each other.

Their arguments would be the stuff of legends, too.

As the waiter left, the room was filled with the faint sound of buzzing. I touched my fingertips to one ear and glanced around, looking for a fly—but as the noise got louder, it seemed like what I needed to be searching for was an entire swarm.

I glanced at Luke, who simply held up a hand and nodded to the door.

The man who entered was as tall as Luke. He was just as impossibly handsome as Luke, but there was something more sinister about him, too. He had piercing black eyes, brown hair, a square jaw and was dressed in black from head to toe.

“There she is,” the man said as the buzzing crescendoed to a peak. His wide lips broke into a smirk, and suddenly, the buzzing stopped. “Our

Lilith, in the flesh.”

“It’s Evie, actually,” I said as he approached me. Lilith was only the name of my first incarnation. I couldn’t remember being her, even though I knew that once upon a time in a beautiful garden, it was the name Luke had called me when we first made love.

“Beelzebub,” the man introduced himself. His voice vibrated in a low baritone, like there was more than one voice speaking at the same frequency in his throat. He bowed low, took my hand, and brought it up to his lips. A shiver shot through me, and I felt an uncomfortable crawling sensation all over my skin. “Zeb, if you’d prefer. At your service.”

“That’s enough,” Luke said with a low growl as Zeb lowered his lips to my knuckles again. Luke grabbed Zeb by the collar of his suit jacket and hauled him away from me. “Try kissing my wife again, and I’ll serve her your heart for breakfast in the morning.”

“She smells sweet as honeysuckle,” Zeb said with a shrug—like that explained away his behavior. He turned to Luke, still smirking. “Well met, adversary. I see you still haven’t learned to share.”

“Nor will I.” Luke let go of Zeb’s jacket, shook the man’s hand, then slipped his arm around my waist possessively. “Old habits die hard.”

“A shame. Let me know if you ever change your mind.” Zeb accepted a tall, frosted glass of beer from the waiter along with his menu. I couldn’t get a good look at what was on it, but I wouldn’t be surprised if it was all carrion.

Luke’s copy of *Dictionnaire Infernal* up in his suite had given Zeb a peculiar honorific that made a lot more sense now that I’d met him: Lord of the Flies.

Zeb had barely gotten a chance to slide into his chair at the table when the next of the Fallen entered. This one was an elderly man with a twisted face and hunched shoulders. His eyes lit up as soon as he saw me. He shuffled toward me with a surprising swiftness and grabbed my face before I could react.

“*Bella! Bellissima!*” He grinned like a madman as he tried to tug my mouth down toward his for a kiss.

“Luke!” I yelled, trying to pull away.

Luke stepped in before I had to struggle too hard. He placed his hand against the old man’s face and shoved him away from me—hard.

“Mammon,” Luke said coldly. His fingers twitched as he pressed them hard into the man’s cheeks. “Behave.”

“*Mi scusi, il Re,*” Mammon whimpered in his croaking Italian. “A joke! *Un piccolo scherzo!* Nothing more.”

“Apologize,” Luke grunted through his teeth as he released Mammon’s face. “Now.”

“*Scusa, bella. Truly.*” Mammon did his best to look contrite as he bowed to me several times. “So close to the face of beauty... Your eyes, precious silver. Your hair, spun gold—*oro*— A man, he cannot contain himself. It is so hard not to want.”

“That’s...all right.” I rubbed my palm against my cheek, trying to wipe away the feeling of his touch.

Luke hadn’t been kidding.

Lock might have been a gentleman, but I was beginning to learn that the rest of the Fallen were as incorrigible as *Dictionnaire Infernal* had claimed.

The next to enter was another man. By process of elimination, I could guess that this was Mulciber. He was a slender man with dark hair and olive-toned skin. He wore a flowy white tunic and brown pants. A leather strap crossed his chest, connected to a long tube that stretched diagonally across his back.

Handsome wasn’t the right word to describe him. With his delicate features and hooked nose...*beautiful*. That was the only word that fit.

His face lit up with hope as he came up to me. He clasped both of his hands around mine and shook eagerly.

“You’re back,” he breathed. He was hardly taller than I was. He stared at me with deep brown eyes like he was in awe. “I hope you’ll stay with us longer this time, my queen. We have so much work to do.”

“Thank you... but I’m not queen yet.” I glanced to Luke, a little lost. Apparently, I was just as uncomfortable with being treated like royalty as I was being hit on. “You’re Mulciber, right? Luke’s architect.”

“Yes, my queen. And if you’ll allow...” Mulciber reached for the tube on his back. “I was thinking we could start in on the nursery? I’m very eager—”

“You always are.” Luke laid a hand on Mulciber’s shoulder. He shook his head back and forth slowly. “But not now, my friend. There will be time for that later.”

Mulciber frowned. "Not always. Sometimes, there isn't."

"This time, there will be." Luke guided Mulciber to one of the two remaining seats, then checked his watch. "That just leaves Belial."

"Aye, she'll be late as always," Lock grumbled. "And my belly will've gnawed itself through with hunger in the meantime, Dawnstar."

"Shall we start without her?" Zeb asked. He tossed me a wink.

Luke looked to me. "Love?"

I nodded. "I don't see why not."

"Good." Luke took my hand and guided me to our seats. "We may be in Hell, but at least the trains run on time."

LUKE

“**A** toast to our king and his bride,” Beelzebub announced once we were all seated again. He raised his beer to Evie and me.

As his eyes caught mine, I raised my glass of wine in return.

All around us, the other Fallen lifted their glasses as well. Mulciber had his ouzo. Mammon, his champagne.

But when Evie raised her glass of coconut water, Beelzebub laughed and shook his head.

“Surely our soon-to-be queen has a real drink for this occasion.” He cocked his head to the side and patted his thigh. “Perhaps you’d rather come over here and sip from my glass, sweetheart. Unless—you’re not already with child, are you?”

“Swarm-bringer,” I growled in warning. My jaw clenched as I tried to decide how best to kill him. A dagger to the throat would be quickest, but I knew exactly how satisfying it would be to plunge my hand straight through his chest as well.

I’d told Evie that she wouldn’t be expected to drink if she didn’t want to. Zeb shouldn’t have pushed the matter. It was a breach of etiquette—one that I hadn’t been prepared for.

On top of that, he’d insulted Evie with his flirtations again—and I *had* promised her his heart on a silver platter.

“You have a keen eye, Zeb.” Evie spoke before I could make good on my earlier threat. If she was bothered by Zeb’s words, she didn’t show it.

“But not keen enough. No, I’m not pregnant—but how kind of you to ask.”

“You’ll drink with us, then?” Zeb looked impressed.

Lock leaned back in his chair, arms crossed over his chest in anticipation.

“I wasn’t planning on it, no. But if you insist...” Evie reached for my whiskey and raised it to Zeb. “I’d rather drink from my husband’s glass than from yours.”

“Evie,” I murmured—but there was no stopping her.

She tossed the whiskey back neatly without flinching, then held the empty glass out for the waiter.

“There.” Her tongue slicked across her lips gorgeously. “And now I suppose I’ll need a refill.”

You don’t have to do this, I wanted to tell her. But I suspected Evie knew that.

Her stubbornness brought a smile to my lips and made my cock stiffen.

God, she was incredible. Every bit my equal. My match in every way.

“Welcome back, Evie.” Zeb tilted his beer toward her with a smile, appeased. “You certainly have been missed.”

“Tae ye, Evie.” Lock chuckled, then took a swig of his whiskey. “Never a dull moment, is it?”

All the others followed suit with their own drinks. But as I sipped at my own wine in Evie’s honor, it was hard to look at anything but her.

With those eyes of hers, her perfect lips, the way that dress hugged her body as her hair cascaded down her back in thick waves of shining gold, I was hard-pressed to find a reason to ever look at anything else.

When the first course arrived, I swapped Evie my fresh oysters with lemon for her wontons in chili oil, just like she’d wanted.

“Have you ever had these before?” I whispered to her as I squeezed the lemon over each of the six shells.

“No,” she admitted beneath her breath. “But I’ll try anything once.”

She reached for a shell, but I brushed her fingers away.

“Let me,” I offered as I raised the shell up to her lips. “You just close your eyes and taste.”

Evie nodded and let her eyelids fall shut. She giggled softly as the oyster slipped into her mouth. Her eyes popped open immediately in surprise as she chewed.

“Mm. You have good taste, Luke,” she admitted.

“Of course I do,” I said with a smile. “I married you, didn’t I?”

To our side, Lock cleared his throat.

“If it’s all the same to ye,” Lock grumbled, “I’ll begin my report as soon as ye two are done sucking each other’s fingers clean.”

“Go on, then,” I told him—then, I grabbed Evie’s hand and wrapped my lips around the tip of her index finger.

It earned me another giggle from her—and an eye roll from Lock to boot—but if I was going to be accused of something, I may as well have deserved it.

“Our armies are ready,” Lock said through a chuckle. “Every demon at our command has been armed and called to prepare for combat. They’ll be training on the seventh floor in preparation for the lass’s coronation—and may God help any angels who try their hand at stopping us, for they’ll surely need it.”

“I’d rather God turned a blind eye and let us have this one, if it’s all the same to you.” I pierced a wonton with my fork and popped it into my mouth. Immediately, the chili made my tongue burn pleasantly.

Evie liked them spicy, it would seem. I’d just have to remember to brush my teeth before I went down on her tonight.

“God’s graces or no, there’s still the matter of Evie’s training yet to be solved.” Lock leaned forward over the table and pointed a finger at Evie. “You, lass, will need to learn to control whatever wee powers yer marriage has afforded ye—and I’ll no have ye arguing with me about it, neither.”

Lock’s brow was set firmly, like he expected Evie to fight him on the matter. She did, on occasion, depending on what kind of life she’d been incarnated into.

I knew he was thinking of Evie’s last life. It had been much more difficult keeping her alive when she’d identified as a pacifist.

Luckily, Evie was hardly a flower child romping naked through the mud at Woodstock this go round.

At Lock’s warning, she merely shrugged and polished off her final oyster. “I’ll start training, then. I’m not afraid of defending myself, Lock. Whatever you’re willing to teach me, I’m happy to learn.”

Lock drew back in his chair, stared at her for a moment, then smiled.

“Aye, lass. Good to know that you’re not afraid of a bit of work.”

With Lock appeased, the waiters swept in to clear away our plates. They were replaced with the amuse-bouche course—a second round of

appetizers, one bite each, served on shallow ceramic spoons.

Evie gave me a wry smile as she traded my caviar blini for a little fried pillow of crispy dough.

“What is this?” I picked it up between my fingers and sniffed at it, curious. I smelled basil and spiced meat—sausage, maybe. “A miniature calzone?”

“It’s a pizza roll, Luke,” Evie said with a laugh. “I used to eat them all the time when I was growing up.”

I returned her laugh and shook my head. “The things I do for love.”

I popped the pizza roll into my mouth and bit down. There was something pleasantly processed-tasting about the molten cheese and the chewy crust.

Not exactly the usual fare I enjoyed in Indulgence, but I could see the appeal.

It would be the perfect thing to feed a child—a little boy with my blue eyes and Evie’s golden hair.

I tucked that fantasy away in the back of my mind as Mammon cleared his throat and rose to his feet.

“Has the location of *la bella*’s coronation been set yet?” Mammon folded his hands and drummed his fingertips together. “I am curious, only so I can begin to set the budget.”

“Notre Dame was mentioned earlier.” I relaxed back in my chair and took a sip of my wine. “We should be able to afford it, yes?”

“Of course, of course.” Mammon turned a slippery smile on Evie. “Your *marito* and I have made some very clever investment decisions of late. Renewable energy, the marijuana industry...”

“Devil’s lettuce.” Lock let out a bark of a laugh. “Course ye did.”

“And we’ve shorted some excellent high P/E stocks,” Mammon added. His smile inched wider and his gaze didn’t stray from Evie’s. “It is a good way to invest, don’t you think?”

I turned to Evie, wondering if I should warn her.

That question was bait—and to my delight, Evie knew it.

“I wasn’t aware it was possible to short stocks with high price-to-earnings ratios,” Evie said casually. She plucked a pearl of caviar from her spoon and popped it into her mouth, holding Mammon’s gaze. “They’d have more sellers than buyers, so you’d be hard-pressed to find stock to

borrow—and even if you were able to, it'd hardly be a good investment strategy.”

“Is that so?” Mammon asked—still playing dumb.

“It is. Which leads me to believe you’re fucking with me, Mammon.” A waiter returned with a fresh glass of whiskey for Evie. He placed it in her hand, and she took a luxurious sip. “And I think Luke and I have made it very clear that the only man allowed to fuck me is him.”

I snorted. So did Lock. Zeb let out a low whistle, and Mammon’s eyes lit up with reverence.

“*Bella*,” he whispered, bowing low. “It truly is you.”

“Of course it is.” Evie glanced at me. “I wasn’t aware that was ever in question.”

“The Fallen like to see for themselves that I haven’t simply lost my heart to some other beautiful human creature,” I explained. I took Evie’s hand in mine and brought her knuckles up to my lips. “As if I ever could.”

“If we’re planning for Paris now, we need to be on alert,” Zeb said, breaking the moment. “The city is swarming with angels even on a dull day. A coronation there will draw heavenly attention—and we hardly want a repeat of last time.”

“Last time?” Evie asked as I gritted my teeth.

“The last time we attempted a coronation,” I explained—though I would have rather avoided discussing it completely. It was hardly a happy tale. “It didn’t go well, suffice to say—but that’s not your concern right now, love. What happened last time will never happen again.”

“But what *did* happen last time?” Evie turned to me with a furrow in her brow. “If I’m going to be fully prepared, I think I have a right to know.”

“Later, love,” I leaned in to whisper to her. “Not now.”

“Why not?” Zeb pushed himself up out of his seat and moved to Evie, so fast he made the movements of the others look like they were being made in slow motion. “Knowledge is the most precious gift we ever gave humankind—and it *is* your memory.”

“Beelzebub,” I warned—but Evie held up a hand to me.

“You can show me?” she asked Zeb.

“Of course.”

Evie took a breath, then nodded. “Do it.”

No, I wanted to bark at both of them. But I couldn’t.

If this was what Evie truly wanted, I knew better than to try and stop her from getting it.

Slowly, Zeb lowered a single fingertip toward Evie's forehead.

"Evie," Zeb purred. "Lilith. *Celeste*."

He tapped her between the eyebrows as a buzzing sound filled the room.

Evie's gaze grew distant and clouded in an instant.

Just like that, I knew she was no longer here with us, but lost somewhere in a memory.

Unfortunately, it would be far from a nice one.

EVIE

SOMEWHERE IN A MEMORY...

Paris, 14 July 1789

My gown was white as fresh snow on a barren field. A corset cinched my waist in so tight, I could feel my organs shift and strain against my ribs. My hair was piled so high atop my head, my neck ached with its heaviness, but I held my chin high despite my discomfort.

I may have been born the daughter of a poor *paysan* in Burgundy, but I wouldn't shame myself by acting like one.

Today, I would become a queen.

"You're radiant, *ma moitié*." Luc pressed his lips to my ear. *His other half*. His voice was a dark, soothing hush in his rough Englishman's lilt, but he spoke his French beautifully just the same. "Are you ready?"

"*Je suis toujours prêt*, Luc," I said—I hoped—with confidence. *I'm always ready*.

"I'll remember that for later," Luc said with a purr. "This dress is beautiful on you—but it'll be even better when I've torn it to shreds."

My heart thrummed as Luc offered me his arm. Before us, *Notre-Dame de Paris* loomed, its spire pointing to the heavens like the finger of an

ancient god.

I had to struggle not to cross myself on instinct as the doors opened wide, inviting us in.

I was the bride of *le Diable*. I'd taken his name, L'Etoile. His ring weighed heavy on my hand, its black diamond large and glittering enough that the queen herself would scream with envy at the sight of it.

I'd lain with him, taken him inside me. I'd given him my virginity, my heart, my soul—

And now, for my troubles, he planned to give me a crown.

With all that in consideration, crossing myself seemed like a sacrilege I could hardly afford right now.

Inside the cathedral, tall candles flickered. From the chess board tile of the floor to the crisscrossed arches of the ceiling, the interior was bathed in a softly golden light.

The pews were full. Their occupants looked human, but I knew them for what they truly were.

Demons. Every member of Luc's horde had arrived here in Paris for this occasion. Each was decked in finery fit for King Louis' court—but a close inspection would reveal sharp teeth hiding behind their tight smiles. Poking up from beneath their powdered hair and white wigs, many had horns as well.

It should have scared me, but it didn't.

The demons in King Louis' court had sharp teeth and horns too, I knew. At least the demons of Hell had the courtesy of wearing them in pride instead of hiding them just out of sight.

An organist played a slow, triumphant march in a minor key as Luc and I walked down the aisle. Demons bowed and curtsied to us as we passed.

"You're shaking, love," Luc whispered. He clasped his hand over mine atop his arm. "Why?"

"Because I'm ready—but I'm also afraid," I said plainly.

The cathedral was perfumed with incense, but outside, all of Paris had been scented with smoke ever since morning. We'd seen rioters wreaking havoc in the streets the whole way to Notre Dame, though none had seemed to notice us. Word was that the Bastille had fallen into National Assembly's hands mere hours ago.

Soon, they would call for noble blood as well.

It was an ill-fated day to be becoming a queen.

“Afraid?” Luc narrowed his eyes. “You’re no coward, love.”

“The brave feel fear too, Luc.” I searched his eyes for that same fear but found none. “So yes. I’m afraid. *N’es tu pas?*”

“No,” Luc said. “I’m not—and you shouldn’t be, either.”

I pursed my lips and said nothing more.

Luc had told me time and again that he would protect me. That every demon in all of hell would fight before me should the angels make good on their threats to see me dead.

I only hoped that one army of demons would be enough.

At the front of the cathedral, before the altar, Luc’s *Déchu*—his retinue of loyal fallen angels—stood at attention. But from beautiful, bronze-skinned *Madame* Belial to hunchbacked *Monsieur* Mammon, each looked as anxious as I felt.

Only Moloch was missing from their number. Luc’s Scotsman remained outside, perched among the gargoyles that stood guard on the cathedral’s roof.

At the first sign of angels descending upon us, he would ring the bells to let us know that my coronation was to become a battle.

If it came to that and we were defeated, I knew all would be lost. All that Luc had worked for to bring us to this moment—and my life, as well.

I saw Beelzebub catch Luc’s eye and shake his head, slow and warning. But Luc disregarded the gesture.

He was courageous, my husband. I’d learned that the night he stole me away from the marquis who would have made me his concubine. He’d been braver still when he took me to the little village chapel where we’d been wed, placing me under his protection and forever out of the marquis’ reach.

But was it bravery that I saw set in Luc’s chiseled jaw now, or simply foolhardy stubbornness?

I supposed we were about to find out.

The music swelled as we came before the altar. Luc’s servant, *la Dame* Legion, approached us. Her dark hair was coiled into a thousand perfect curls. Her black skin gleamed gorgeously in the low light. In her hands, she bore a pillow of black velvet, smooth as a clouded night.

Upon the pillow rested my crown. It was exquisite. There was no other word—not in Latin, Luc’s English, or my French.

It was wrought from a black metal wound with strands of gold like vines. Black and white diamonds hung from its crest, laced with kisses of ruby. Stars and blood.

“My Celeste.” Luc took me by the shoulders and turned me to face him. “*Mon coeur. Mon âme. Mon éternité.*”

I held my breath as his lips moved to mine. His mouth burned. His tongue slipped against my own, a greedy flame.

“Kneel, love,” Luc whispered against my lips. “It will all be over soon.”

I lowered myself to my knees before Luc. I had knelt to many men before him, but never quite in the same way.

When I dropped to my knees for Luc, it was usually to please him with my mouth.

Mon Dieu, how I wished we were back at his *Château de L’Enfer* doing exactly that right now.

My heart pounded violently, like a little dove trying desperately to escape the cage of my ribs, as Luc reached for the crown and raised it up over my head.

All around us, I could feel the congregation of Luc’s demons holding their breaths as well.

“My Lilith,” Luc breathed as he placed the crown upon my head. “*La Reine de L’Enfer*. Queen of Hell, forever more.”

I looked up to Luc and released my breath. He offered me his hand, and I took it as I rose.

His next kiss was a passionate one. He claimed me with his mouth, one hand cupping my jaw and the other wrapped possessively around my throat.

Hunger roared within me. It wracked my body and sent my hands to the lapels of his jacket, clutching and clawing.

It was done.

Thank God, it was done.

Our kiss didn’t break naturally, though. All around us, the cathedral’s bells began to ring, sharp and booming.

Moloch’s warning reverberated throughout the room.

I’d been wrong.

Only my coronation was done.

In its place, a battle was about to begin.

Demons rippled through the pews, drawing swords, muskets and axes from the folds of their jackets and gowns. Our numbers were great—

But as the doors of Notre Dame burst open, I could already tell that the numbers of the angelic army descending on us were greater.

“*Arrière!* Stay behind me!” Luc roared. He threw his arms out wide as he moved between me and the wave of white wings that flooded the cathedral. Flames appeared in his hands, burning strong enough that I could feel their heat licking my skin as I pressed myself to Luc’s back.

Luc’s fallen angels formed up in front of us, armed with flames and swords as well.

They would fight for my life until they could fight no more, as would Luc.

Would it be enough?

Oui, my heart whispered, but in my soul, another voice sounded.

Non.

Angels had set upon us twice during our carriage ride to Paris. Twice now, I’d seen the fury of their blades and gnashing teeth of their doves as they sought to part my head from my throat.

Twice, my life had been saved by Hell’s army.

Whether I lived or died today would be in God’s hands—and I could hardly imagine that He would smile upon the Devil’s bride a third time.

I held out my hands, willing what meager flames I could summon to appear in my palms. When they flared up, they were far weaker than the ones Luc wielded.

We’d only been married for a month now. In one month, Luc had taken the life God had given me and turned it completely inside out.

I wasn’t prepared for this, but Luc hadn’t been prepared to wait. When he first told me of this plan on the night of our wedding, I’d tried to run from him—and he’d kept me captive in Hell for my efforts.

It was a chain of events that had broken a treaty I hadn’t even been aware of—and in the process, damned us both.

Now, there was nothing to do but fight and hope.

The first wave of the angels were descended on by the army of demons rushing from the cathedral’s pews. Feathers exploded through the air as muskets were fired. The demons’ human disguises, wigs and fans and gowns, were torn away and tossed aside as they released their battle cries.

Notre Dame's gargoyles flew in with the second wave. They snatched at angelic necks with their stony fingers and tossed them, broken, against the cathedral's walls.

It wasn't enough.

More and more angels flowed into the cathedral. A high, haunting heavenly chorus left their throats, mixing dissonantly with the demonic battle roars. Legion multiplied into twenty versions of herself, all armed with daggers and laughing madly as they took on the angels in groups of twos and threes at a time. The air before us split as Abaddon, one of Luc's lieutenants, emerged from the Abyss and launched himself at an angel flying towards us with an already-bloodied sword.

Beelzebub held his arms out wide, summoning a swarm of flies so thick that they cloaked him completely as they buzzed around him. He moved monstrosly as he took to the air, pinning an angel against the ceiling and holding them there until their wings stopped twitching. Mulciber darted in and out of the fray, dipping low to slash at ankles, and beautiful Belial drove her talons through the chests of her opponents, piercing and clenching until she had their still-beating hearts in her clutches.

All fought, and all prevailed—but the angels kept coming.

It still wasn't enough.

I watched Mammon flee first. Luc's shrewd Italian money man gave me a look of half-hearted apology, then slipped away.

Mammon didn't fight battles he didn't think he could win.

In that moment, I knew that we'd already lost.

Luc fought fiercely as our lines of defense broke. Every angel that came at us, he left smoldering in the wake of the hellfire from his hands. But above us, Beelzebub's body dropped with a sickening *crack*. His flies dissipated in an instant.

He didn't get back up.

He was the first of Luc's closest comrades to fall, but far from the last.

I stuck close to Luc's back, shooting my own flames out wherever they seemed to be needed. But as my gaze passed over the pews, I saw too many of Legion's broken bodies to count. White doves with bellies full of teeth tore at Mulciber's twitching frame in the center of the aisle, and as Belial reached her claws into yet another angel's chest, he returned the

favor. The two of them slumped to the floor slowly, squeezing each other's hearts into pulpy blood.

Our gargoyles were shattered, one by one. What demons we still had standing were wounded and tiring. At the door, Moloch had loosed his kilt. It fell to the ground, leaving him fighting in only his léine croich—his knee-length war shirt—as he pierced angel after angel with his sword.

Unfortunately, the pile of bodies he'd amassed was swept away along with Moloch as yet another wave of angels swarmed into the room.

"*Luc!*" I hissed, placing a hand on his shoulder. "We need to retreat. *Now.*"

"If we retreat now, they'll kill us with our backs turned," Luc snarled back at me. He blasted another oncoming angel with his flames, then kicked her smoking body aside. "We don't surrender, love. We fight, and we win."

"We fight, and we *die*, Luc!" What had worked for the assembly at the Bastille was obviously failing for us, and faster than my eyes could track.

But every demon that fell only made Luc fight harder. He decimated entire groups of angels with quick, furious sweeps of his palms.

Luc was an army all of his own. As he thinned their herd, for a moment, I almost believed he'd succeed here.

I almost believed we'd win.

But then, I heard the voice in my ear, and I knew that I was wrong.

"Lilith," the cool, deep voice whispered against my lobe. I knew that voice. *Michel*—the rich man who had presented me to the marquis whom Luc had stolen me from. An angel in disguise. "Let this end."

Michel reached around my body from behind. His hand moved quickly—a single swipe.

Something hot and wet flowed down my collarbones. It pooled between the swells of my breasts then trickled down to my ribs.

It was only when I looked down at the white of my dress, now blooming with a stain like splashed wine, that I realized the warmth was my blood.

The fire in my hand fizzled out immediately. I hadn't even had a chance to defend myself.

I hadn't even felt Michel's dagger as it sliced across my throat.

I dropped to my knees. By the time I hit the floor, all the angels had vanished.

Luc turned and let out a cry of agony when he saw the reason his enemies were now gone.

“Celeste! No!” His roar split in his throat as he dove for me. He caught me in his arms just before I fell back against the floor. “*Mon cœur*—my love—stay with me, damn you!”

I opened my mouth to tell him I was sorry, but the blood flowed up over my tongue when I tried to use my voice. I tried to cough, but there was no air in my lungs.

Let it end, Michel had said—and an end was what he’d ensured.

“*Mon chérie*...” Luc’s voice was panicked as he clasped a hand over my throat, but the cut was too deep. The room around us was fading black around the edges now. I tried my best to focus on the pale blue of his eyes, but that hurt far more than Michel’s dagger ever could.

The time in which I’d known Luc was short, but through all of it, I’d never seen him cry before.

Now, his tears fell freely. They burned as they rained down on my cheeks.

“Don’t leave me, love.” I’d never heard Luc beg before either, but he begged wholeheartedly now. “Please, *mon âme*. Don’t leave me. Don’t go.”

I struggled to raise a hand to Luc’s cheek. I couldn’t feel his heat beneath my fingers. I couldn’t feel the damp on his cheeks as I tried in vain to wipe away his tears.

When Luc lowered his lips to my blood-slickened mouth, I couldn’t feel his kiss—but I knew it was there.

It was enough.

It would have to be enough.

Luc’s face was contorted with pain when he drew away again, though I hadn’t seen him injured.

His mouth, curled in anger, was stained with my blood.

“I love you.” Luc slumped to his knees and pulled my back against his chest. “God damn me, I love you. I can’t lose you. Please, love. Fight for me. Don’t leave me. Not now. Not like this.”

The dark was thicker now. My vision was narrowing to a pinprick. As the darkness engulfed me, I couldn’t tell if it was because I was dead already, or if I’d only just closed my eyes.

Sound left me last. I couldn’t feel Luc’s embrace. I couldn’t see him, couldn’t touch him—couldn’t move.

But I could hear his breathing, ragged and rough. And I heard his voice in my ear, a final promise as I felt myself drifting away.

“I will find you again,” he swore. “I will wait for you, and I will find you, and I will love you. I’ll always love you—always...”

Luc’s voice faded away like a whisper on the breeze. With it, so did I.

It would be a bad century for monarchs, I thought as the blood filled my throat. Myself among them.

Born a peasant. Died... a queen.

LUKE

I loved when Evie remembered. I wanted her to know who she truly was—who she'd been. How much I loved her and everything that she could become.

But as Evie slumped sideways, out of her chair and into my arms, I shot Beelzebub a glare.

Some moments were best left forgotten.

Her thick, dark eyelashes fluttered frantically. She came to gasping and clutching her throat.

"Shh. I've got you, love." I pulled her onto my lap and hugged her tight. My kisses landed wherever I could find a place to put them—on her forehead, her temple, the tip of her nose and the top of her head. "It's all right. Come out of it for me. You're safe. You're whole. I've got you."

Evie gave a final gasp and a shudder. Her hands clung to me, grabbing my jacket, my collar, my neck—whatever she could reach.

"*Je suis mort, Luc.*" Her voice was a rasp. Her accent, perfect French. "*Je suis mort, et c'était—*"

"It was my fault." A wretched slickness filled my stomach and churned darkly within it. "I know, love. I'm so sorry. It was all my fault."

"*Non, Luc—*" Evie stopped, blinked, and shook her head slightly. "I mean, no. I wasn't trying to say it was your fault—just, that it was *horrible.*"

“It was,” I agreed. My voice was hoarse with regret. I remembered it too—and every other time she’d died in my arms as well. It made my teeth grind, made my heart feel like someone had kicked it in with the point of their boot. “But you’re safe now, love—and I swear to you, it will never happen again.”

“I hope you’re right.” Evie clung even tighter to me and buried her face in my chest. “I really hope you’re right.”

Vaguely, I was aware that the others were still in the room. They may as well have been on Mars, for all I cared about what their opinions were right now.

Evie was still shaking as she recovered from her memory, and I no longer had a damn to give about the Fallen or their reports.

I held her to me, kissed her hair and smoothed my hand down her back until the shaking stopped.

It wasn’t just for her benefit, either.

If I didn’t have her in my lap to soothe right now, I knew I’d be shaking too.

“So she knows the stakes now.” Zeb finally broke the silence. He’d had the good sense to stop smirking. If I’d detected the slightest hint of a smile on his lips, my next order of business would have been to draw my dagger, cut them off and make him eat them.

“She knew the stakes from the start, Zeb.” My voice was level, but dark and cold as the edge of the universe itself.

My eyes locked on Beelzebub’s. He held my gaze without flinching.

“Still want to have the coronation in Paris, then?” he asked after a long moment.

“No.” I lifted Evie up in my arms, scraped my chair back, and rose. “You’ve made your point.”

As I carried Evie to the door, a tall, bronze-skinned woman with long, straight black hair emerged from it. Her dress was a long satin slip, the same color as her lipstick—merlot.

She placed her hands against the doorframe and struck a sensual pose.

I stopped in front of her and stared her down. “Belial. Move.”

“Oh, I can move, adversary.” Belial wiggled her hips sensually, but she didn’t move from the door. Her gaze slid from me onto Evie. “Is that our new Lilith?”

“It is.” I nodded. “Move.”

“Aren’t you going to introduce me?” she pouted. “I’ve only just arrived.”

“Too late. Dinner’s done.” I turned to the side, prepared to shoulder her out of the way if need be. “If you want to play games, show up on time.”

Belial slid aside at the last moment, allowing us to pass.

“Poor thing.” Belial plucked at Evie’s hair as we crossed her path. “She’s very decorative, isn’t she?”

“That she is.” I didn’t stop, didn’t turn.

“Bring her by my room when she’s feeling better,” Belial called after us. “Unless...surely she’s not dying on us already again?”

I didn’t bother validating that with a reply—but Evie did.

“Fuck off,” she grunted.

Belial pressed her fingertips to her lips and giggled. “Oh, *adversary*. I love this version of her.”

I kept walking.

Fuck off indeed.

Moloch could take care of anything else the Fallen had to discuss for the evening.

The only thing that mattered to me right now was getting my bride safe to bed.

“So that was Belial,” Evie murmured against my chest as I carried her back through Indulgence.

“That was Belial,” I confirmed.

“I already hate her.”

I snorted. If Evie’s capacity for disdain was back, at least it meant she was feeling a little better. “She grows on you.”

“Like a cancerous mole, I bet.” Evie tilted her head to the side as we passed the kitchens. “Do you hear that, Luke, or did I come back from the dead with a concussion?”

“Mm.” I perked my ears up for a moment. The sound of crashing cymbals and dirty guitars flowed from the kitchen like wine at a bacchanal. “I do.”

“That’s Sex Pistols, isn’t it?”

“It is,” I confirmed. “Bourdain must be in tonight.”

“I like this song.” Evie closed her eyes and cuddled closer to my chest as we approached the elevator. “God Save the Queen.”

The elevator doors opened to Phlegyas's smiling face. Back from his day off, apparently.

He straightened his jacket and prepared to bow. But his smile faded as he caught sight of Evie in my arms.

"Is she all right, Your Majesty?" His brow furrowed as he looked her up and down. "She's terribly pale."

"She's had a rough night—which she's gotten through beautifully," I said—more to Evie than Phlegyas.

"I did not," Evie grumbled sleepily. "I had a bad flashback and panicked. I can only imagine what the Fallen are saying about me now."

"You, pretty girl, downed an entire glass of whiskey in one go, lectured Mammon on the workings of the stock market, and cursed at Belial." I pressed a kiss to her temple. "You couldn't have done better."

"I'm inclined to concur." Phlegyas's white-gloved finger hovered over the buttons as he glanced up at me. "Ninth floor, Your Majesty?"

I nodded, and Phlegyas hit the button.

"How was your day off, Phlegyas?" Now that I had a moment to look at him, I noticed his hat, usually fastened so pristinely atop his steely gray hair, was slightly askew. He'd missed a button on his jacket as well. "Date with destiny?"

"Oh, no, Your Majesty." Phlegyas glanced down at his jacket and quickly did up the final button. "I try not to tempt the fates, if I can help it."

"Clever man."

"Hardly, I'm afraid." Phlegyas straightened his hat and shook his head mournfully. "No, I went to petition Heaven again. Not that I dislike working here in Hell, of course—"

"I'd hope not." My eyes softened as I stared down at Evie. Even fragile like this, she was beyond beautiful—and I never said no to an opportunity to have her in my arms. "What did they say?"

"No, of course. Just like always."

"You could always try Olympus." Phlegyas was a son of Ares, after all. He wouldn't be the first half-blood they let in. "Or Hades, for that matter."

"It's Heaven or nothing for me, I'm afraid." The doors opened, and Phlegyas held his arm out to keep them that way as we exited. "And as I said, Your Majesty—I am still happy here in Hell."

“Better luck next time.” I gave him a nod, then carried Evie off into the suite.

I SHOULD HAVE BEEN in a black mood by the time I got Evie into bed. Beelzebub had crossed a line when he offered her the memory of her own death, and it wasn’t as if the others had acted much better. Save for Moloch and Mulciber, they’d all misbehaved as expected.

I was beginning to wonder if I shouldn’t start expecting better. Of all of them.

If we wanted to prevent a repeat of what had happened in Paris, we’d all need to be better. Faster. Stronger. More clever, better prepared, better armed.

I meant it when I said I wasn’t losing her again.

But despite the dark turn for the evening, when I laid Evie down on our bed, I didn’t feel anger.

I felt relief.

Here she was. Safe. Healthy. Alive.

Mine.

I slipped her heels off her feet and tossed them aside, then shifted up onto the bed next to her.

Alive and mine. My woman. My bride.

It was more than we had in some incarnations. Last time, we’d barely had three days.

This time, if we did things right, we’d have forever—and I couldn’t imagine a better eternity than the one I could spend here in this bed with my wife.

“Let’s get you out of that dress.” I reached behind her and eased the zipper down.

Evie sighed with pleasure as the dress released its hold on her body.

“God. That feels better already.”

“Bra next?” I suggested, placing a kiss on her shoulder.

She nodded. “Bra next.”

I stripped her down out of her clothes, slow and sweet. I couldn’t look at Evie without wanting her. Never found a way to manage that. Never wanted to.

But tonight was not a night for fucking. Maybe it had been before Evie was given the memory of her death in Paris on Bastille Day, but no longer.

Tonight was a night for holding her close, kissing every flawless inch of her body, and not letting her go until sunrise and responsibility demanded that we leave this bed.

“Evie?” I murmured as I tugged the lace of her panties down from her hip.

“Yes, Luke?”

I left a kiss on her hipbone and paused for a moment to breathe in her scent.

Divine. Just like the rest of her.

It was the worst habit that losing her so many times had brought out in me.

Every moment with Evie had to be savored. There was no other choice.

I never knew when a moment would be our last.

“What happened in that memory...” I moved over her stomach and rested my forehead against the little hollow beneath her ribs. “It isn’t going to happen again.”

“Luke...” Evie sighed and ran her fingers through my hair. It begged the question—who was soothing whom here? I’d brought her up to our room to take care of her, but the truth of it was, she was taking care of me just the same.

“I mean it, love.” I raised my head to stare up at her. There was peace for me in those lovely gray eyes of hers. They were the color of a new morning, a fresh day where anything was possible. It was the only solace I’d ever known. “Every time you die, it kills me too.”

“I know, hon.” Evie smoothed my hair down over the back of my head. “I saw that too. I know.”

“I can’t let it happen again.” I shook my head and shifted up to lay alongside her. “And it *won’t*. This time, I’ve taken every precaution. We haven’t broken any treaty. We’re married. We’re safe. And I’m not going to do anything to jeopardize that. Never again.”

“So I’m still allowed to go to class tomorrow?” Evie placed her hand against my cheek and massaged the hinge of my jaw gently with her thumb. “Even though it’s Above, where all those rascally angels can get me?”

“As much as I’d love to tie you to this bed and keep you here for the rest of eternity...” I took her wrists in my hands and shifted them up above her head, pinning them against the headboard with a weary smirk. “No,

love, I won't be stopping you. For as long as you have your freedom, no angel can touch you directly. I'm not taking that away from you—even if it means forcing you to endure the horny stares of two dozen weed-addled literary boys.”

“They now stare less than they used to, actually.” Evie closed her eyes and shifted her wrists beneath my hands lazily, like she enjoyed how it felt. “I’ve become a much more dangerous woman since you made me your wife.”

“Dangerous enough that I ought to get the rope after all?” I was only teasing—but she couldn't blame a man for hoping.

“Maybe not for all of eternity...” Evie smiled as she opened her eyes again. “But if anyone's going to tie me down, it probably ought to be you.”

“Evelyn Dawnstar...are you telling me you might have a bit of a bondage kink?”

“With you?” Evie arched her back, rising up to kiss the tip of my nose. “I'm willing to entertain the idea, at least.”

I grinned.

Fascinating.

This wouldn't be the first cycle where Evie had revealed something of a submissive streak. There was something indomitable about her that always made it especially pleasurable when she let me indulge her in it, too.

I tucked that thought away as I released her wrists and rose from the bed.

“I didn't mean tonight, Luke,” Evie warned me. “I think today has been a little much to start playing around with BDSM on top of it, don't you?”

“I'm not grabbing the rope,” I promised. I moved to the lights and flipped them off to prove it was no lie. “You've been in the wars tonight, perfect girl. You need comforting.”

“I'm not sleepy yet, though,” she pouted.

“A movie, then.” I pulled out my phone and hit the button to turn on the projector I'd had installed for her. It was connected to my entire film collection—every movie ever made, including the ones that hadn't hit theaters yet. Hell wasn't terribly concerned with release dates, and neither was I. “We could watch *Rosemary's Baby*, *The Omen*...”

Evie snorted as the projector whirled to life over the bed. “I see you're still on your baby train. Between you and my mother...”

“I like films with a devilish touch.” The projector bathed me in blue-white while I hit the button to lower the screen down over the door.

“Or you’re trying to put wicked ideas in my head.”

“I’m just foreshadowing, love.” I kicked my shoes off, then tossed Evie my phone. “Pick whatever you like.”

“Something without the antichrist in it, I think.” Evie slipped beneath the blankets as she began to flip through the selection of films on my phone. She looked up every so often to watch me undress, smiling to herself at every item of clothes I removed. “What about *Witches of Eastwick*? You’re no Jack Nicholson, of course, but...”

“The Devil can only be so perfect.” I tugged my boxers down and tossed them aside so I could crawl into bed next to her. Her body shifted against mine—thigh across my lap, arms around my waist.

I draped an arm across her shoulders and pulled her close to me. Her head nestled beneath my chin—a perfect fit.

Having Evie like this—naked, in my bed, skin against skin—I couldn’t imagine a more perfect thing in all the world.

She made me happy when nothing else could.

She made me believe in things—things like justice, and love, and hope—that I would have lost all faith in aeons ago if it hadn’t been for her.

She made the world brighter, more wholesome, more whole, just by existing.

I loved her. I loved her completely, with everything that I was.

Even when she still couldn’t quite bring herself to admit that she loved me back.

As I held her there, the movie began to play. I hardly bothered with watching it, though.

She could bask in the glow of the projector and its Hollywood magic all she liked.

I was far more partial to simply bask in the glow of *her*.

I’d meant it when I said it.

I couldn’t lose her again. I couldn’t bear it.

I wanted this closeness, this warmth, this impossible, inevitable feeling of love, to last forever.

I never wanted to know the pain of being without her again—

And I wouldn’t.

No matter what.

EVIE

I kissed the smile on his lips the next morning. If I moved carefully and slowly, every peck could cover a new part of Luke's sleepy smirk.

"Feeling better?" Luke mumbled when I finally drew away.

"Much," I assured him. It was incredible, how a night naked in bed watching old movies with Luke could smooth out everything else completely.

I felt warm. I felt loved.

It was almost like I hadn't been forced to relive my own death last night at all.

"It's sweet of you to kiss me in the morning, love." Luke chuckled to himself as he finally opened his eyes. He rolled out of bed and moved to the window, giving me a gorgeous glimpse of his perfectly shaped ass. I was once again grateful that Luke didn't seem to be aware of the existence of pajamas—it meant I started every morning with an incredible view. "I imagine my breath smells like Hell."

"All those sermons about brimstone were exaggerating." I sat up and stretched luxuriously as Luke pulled open the curtains, bathing us both in golden morning sunlight. "You only ever smell like you. *I'm* the one who needs a toothbrush and a shower."

"You only ever smell like you too, darling girl." Luke basked naked in the sunshine in front of the window for a moment. When he turned back to

look at me, his grin was a wicked one. “But if it’s a shower you’re after, at least let me join you.”

I forced myself up out of bed to find my phone. When I glanced at the time, I couldn’t help but groan.

“We won’t have enough time to do any of your favorite shower activities,” I warned him. “We slept in. At this rate, I won’t even have time to wash my hair.”

“I’ll wash it for you.” Luke came over to me and wound my hair around his hands. “Dry it, too. It’s long enough, I don’t know how you ever managed without me.”

“Sometimes, I wonder the same thing.” It wasn’t just Luke’s uncanny ability to work heat through my hair faster than any blow dryer ever could, either.

Everything about having Luke in my life had improved it so far. When I thought about where I would have ended up without him, it was actually a little terrifying.

I would have either been murdered by angels by now, or in an unhappy marriage with my cheating ex-fiancé, for one.

I wasn’t sure which of those things would have been worse, but I was glad I didn’t have to find out.

Luke took my hand and led me to the shower. The water ran hot immediately—in the Inferno, it always did.

“Such lovely hair.” Luke placed me beneath the water, tilted my head back, and started to massage my scalp. “Still think you ought to cut it someday.”

“Really?” I closed my eyes to keep the water out of them while Luke raked his fingers through my waves. “If you like it so much...”

“I like *you*, love. Your hair is secondary. Wear it long, short—hell, shave it bald if you like.” Luke stole a humid kiss from my lips, then dipped to grab the shampoo. “I just imagine it must be sweltering in the summer, as thick as it is.”

“Nice and warm during the cold Vermont winter, though.” I purred softly as Luke worked the shampoo through my roots.

“Is that why you grew it out so long?” Luke lathered the shampoo up thick, until we were surrounded by the smell of jasmine and rose. “To keep your pretty head warm?”

“I’m not sure, really,” I admitted. “It was already pretty long when I met Adam, and after... Every time I thought about cutting it, he talked me out of it, I guess.”

“You’re no Sampson, Evie.” Luke rinsed the shampoo out, then reached for conditioner. He needed an entire handful of it to get the job done. If the Inferno had a gift shop, I imagined I’d just about emptied it of every bottle it had. “Cut it or don’t—but never think you need to keep it so long on my account.”

“I’ll take that into consideration, then. Maybe we could—*oh*.” Luke’s cock brushed against my stomach, thick and stiff, as he drew closer and slathered the conditioner all the way down my waves.

“If you don’t finish that sentence, darling...” Luke’s lips brushed against my ear as he took my hair into his fists. “I’ll have to finish it for you.”

“And then we’ll both finish, I’m sure.” I knew I’d told Luke no sexy shower times, but I could imagine it perfectly. He was strong enough, he could lift me up, pin me against the tiles, and sink my pussy down onto his cock without even breaking a sweat in the shower’s steam. “First, me around your big, thick shaft, then you—deep inside me—”

“Then you again,” Luke growled. “Over and over, until you have no choice but to come back to bed with me for the rest of the day.”

“And finally, my career will be finished.” I drew back to meet Luke’s gaze. His blue eyes were so intense when he was hard like this, it was difficult not to give in to every dirty thing he desired—but I knew that even giving Luke an inch right now would result in me getting all nine inches of *him* in return. “I already canceled a class last week so you could fuck me on the piano in Heresy, if you recall.”

“An incredibly worthy excuse, if you ask me.”

I took Luke’s cock in one hand and cupped his cheek in the other.

“*Later*,” I promised, giving him a single, slow pump with my fist. “When I get back from school, you can fuck me wherever—and however—you like.”

“Promise?” Luke’s voice was so husky and sweet in that moment, I almost changed my mind about our timeline today—almost.

“Promise.” I forced myself to let go of his cock and pressed a kiss to his lips instead. “Surely you have things to do today too, don’t you?”

Luke sighed. “Unfortunately.” He twisted my hair into a knot at the top of my head and twirled me around to protect me from the water while the conditioner worked its magic. “The Fallen will require attention—especially after last night.”

“I didn’t make a mess of things for you, did I?” I frowned slightly as Luke reached for my loofah and body wash.

I knew it must have been embarrassing, the way Luke had to cut dinner short and carry me up to bed like some kind of pathetic, overstimulated child.

I knew the fact that I’d had to tap out early like that in front of his powerful, sinister fallen angel friends must have made it even worse.

“You made a mess of nothing, darling girl,” Luke said sternly. “And don’t you dare try to convince yourself you did, either. It’s them that ought to be sorry—and they will be. I’ll make sure of that.”

“I did *ask* Zeb for that memory, Luke,” I reminded him. “Even when I could tell you didn’t want me to.”

“You didn’t know what you were getting yourself into. Beelzebub did.” Luke turned me around, so my back was against his chest. His cock pressed against my ass now, still impossibly hard despite the turn in conversation. He really didn’t know how to quit—and damn me, I didn’t ever want him to learn. “They were unkind to you, Evie. I won’t stand for it, and neither will you.”

“You can’t spend all day paddling demon ass though, Luke.”

“Can’t I?” Luke gave me a gentle spank with the loofah. “Why? Feeling jealous?”

“Not in the least.” Though, now that Luke mentioned it...maybe a *little*.

“Mm. Still, it’s worth mentioning that I’d rather be taking you over my knee instead.” Luke took the loofah to my thigh, moving it in firm little circles until a thick, fragrant foam began to form against my skin. “But if it makes you feel any better, Beelzebub will merely receive a stern talking to—and maybe a round or two in the ring with me on the seventh floor if I feel like I haven’t made my point clear.”

A darkly delicious image of Luke punching the smirk right off of Zeb’s face in the middle of Might filled my mind—but I had to push that one down, and fast.

I didn't need Luke to know how much I liked the idea of him smacking the snot out of a fallen angel over my honor—lest he started finding more excuses to do so.

“And for the rest of your day?” I asked as Luke traded the loofah for his hand. I stiffened and panted slightly as he slipped his fingers between my thighs, cupping my sex. Heat flushed through me, rapidly advancing all up and down my body like wildfire.

“I'll meet and organize with the Fallen,” Luke growled into my ear, achingly dark and slow. “I'll make business plans, talk strategy...” The words he was saying weren't exactly sexy, but the way he was saying them—he might as well have been describing how he was going to spread my thighs and fuck me cross-eyed atop a midnight blue Lamborghini. “And then, when you're ready for me to fly you home, I'll spend the entire ride to Los Angeles so painfully stiff for you I'll have to struggle not to tear your clothes off, bend you over and take you right there atop your desk.”

“Oh,” I breathed. Luke's words made me lightheaded, and the devilish way he was moving his fingers over the lips of my pussy was making it even worse. “And on the ride back?”

Luke laughed darkly—one short, cruel sound. “I'll order you to come every five minutes until you're either so soaked by the time we land, I'll be able to slide you all the way back to bed, or until you lose control of yourself completely, you'll leap onto my lap and ride me so hard that I crash the fucking helicopter.”

“Luke,” I said with urgency. My cunt throbbed intensely enough that it almost hurt.

“Yes, love?”

“I've changed my mind.” I swallowed hard as I turned around. My arms looped around his neck, pulling his body as close to mine as two bodies could be. “Fuck me.”

“Are you sure about that, love?” Luke's hand trailed down my back. I shuddered as he traded the ridges of my spine.

“Yes,” I hissed. It was more than just my pussy that was throbbing now. My entire body was thrumming with heat and need. “*Please.*”

“Mm.” Luke took my lips against his and kissed me passionately. Every time he slipped his tongue against mine, he made the wanting that much worse. “I could, you know...but...”

“Luke!” I almost shouted his name at him as I popped up on my tiptoes, straining to have his lips on mine again.

Luke only smirked. “You, my darling bride, have a schedule to keep, remember?”

“Fuck the schedule.” I scowled up at him. “Luke, fuck *me*!”

“It was cruel of me to tempt you, Evie,” Luke admitted. “But *God*, it’s a pleasure to watch you burn.”

“This is what I get for marrying the Devil, isn’t it?” I glowered, pouting slightly.

“Yes, love.” Luke smiled down at me lovingly. “This is what you get.”

He lifted me off my feet and placed me beneath the water again. For a moment, I wished it could have been icy cold. At least that might have cooled me off a little as he rinsed the soap from my body and the conditioner from my hair.

Luke washed his own body quickly while Itoweled off. I knew that the way he’d made me want him would stick with me all day long, building and crescendoing until I finally saw him again.

If I ended up making him crash the helicopter, it would serve him right.

But as badly as I wanted him this morning...

I knew it would be just as fun to feel my need for him turn to ravenous desperation until we could finally both be satisfied.

“What about you, darling?” Luke asked as he stepped out of the shower. His body glistened and glimmered as the water droplets slid down his taut, muscled frame. “What are you up to today?”

“Languishing in desire apparently.” I moved a soft, fluffy towel down my legs and tried to ignore the way even the softest sensation of touch against my skin made me pine for Luke’s hands all the more.

“Other than that, I mean.”

I sighed. “I have a class to teach. Not that I’ll be able to focus on it now.”

“What book?” Luke asked curiously, reaching for his own towel.

“Prometheus Bound. The Percy Shelley translation.”

“You should be able to focus just fine, then.” Luke tossed another towel at me, and I tipped my head upside down to wrap my hair up in it. “It’s about me, after all.”

I twisted the towel around my hair and straightened, eyes narrowed. “What do you mean?”

“Prometheus is a myth, of course.”

“I could’ve said the same of you just a few months ago.”

“Yes, but some myths are truer than others.” Luke wrapped his towel around his waist with a little chuckle. “Prometheus didn’t bring fire to humanity. I did. Tricked some cherubim into letting me borrow the flaming sword they were guarding Eden with.”

“And the tale about how Prometheus was chained to that rock so eagles could eat out his liver every night?”

“Oh, yes. That happened. For a little while, anyway.” Luke pulled me to him and gave me a peck on the lips. “It was worth it, though. You were cold.”

As I packed my bag and got dressed for the day, I was all too aware of Luke getting dressed behind me. The soft fabric of my blouse brushed against the tops of my breasts in a gentle caress. My pencil skirt hugged my hips deliciously.

But all I could think about was how badly I wished I could have Luke’s hands on my breasts and hips instead.

Leaving Luke to go maintain my human life was never easy, but lately it felt like it was getting harder every time I had to head to Los Angeles.

My phone buzzed as I tossed it on top of my workout clothes. My adviser, Raph’s, name appeared on the screen along with a notification that I had a new email.

When I opened it, I only wanted to stay here in the Inferno all the more.

“What’s wrong, love?” Luke asked, seeing my frown as I read the text.

“It’s Raph,” I said with a groan. “He’s annoyed with me. Says I don’t seem like I’ve been applying myself lately.”

“He does know that you just got married, doesn’t he?” Luke shrugged on his black suit jacket with concern knitted into his brows.

“I mentioned it.” Which was when the criticism on my work ethic had started, incidentally—though I didn’t dare mention *that* to Luke.

Really, I didn’t have to.

Somehow, Luke always knew.

“Then let him know your husband says you’re working too hard, in fact.” A sinister glint caught in Luke’s blues. “He can stop giving you

grief, or I'll give him some grief in return—the kind only Satan himself can deliver on.”

“It’s fine, Luke,” I sighed. As much as I loved the idea of Luke defending my honor, I knew the second he started turning on my professors, we’d have much bigger problems than an annoyed email to deal with. “Raph has always been a little...intense. And he’s not wrong. I *have* been slacking.”

My marriage to Luke had been so sudden, we hadn’t even really had time for a honeymoon—but what time we’d stolen away together despite that had put me behind on my thesis.

“You deserve downtime, Evie.” Luke moved behind me and took my hair down out of the towel I’d wrapped it in. Just like he’d promised, he raked his fingers through it with heat radiating from his fingertips.

I closed my eyes and let myself enjoy it for a few moments before I turned my gaze back to my phone and sent Raph a quick apology email, promising him that I’d stop by his office after my run to talk shop. Hopefully, that would appease him.

By the time I hit send, Luke had dried my hair completely. When I peeked at myself in the mirror, I smiled.

It was the best blow-out I’d ever gotten.

Blowing and Luke always seemed to go hand in hand—or, when we had more time, cock in mouth.

“You’re going to have to fly like hell to get us to LA in time for my class,” I told him as I glanced at the time. “I’m afraid, Mr. Dawnstar, we’re incredibly late.”

“Is there any other way to fly?” Luke gathered all my hair in his hands and laid it neatly down my back. “It’s a shame I can’t take you back down to Indulgence for breakfast. I’ll give you my Amex so you can grab something on campus.”

“No breakfast, no love-making...” I pouted performatively as I turned to face Luke. “It’s not fair, is it?”

He smiled down at me, warm and kind as he pulled me into a final kiss before we headed up to the rooftop.

“I know, darling girl,” he breathed against my lips. “But I’ll make it up to you when you’re done for the day. You can only be expected to sacrifice so much.”

“Promise?” My eyes narrowed seductively. “Maybe you could reward me for all these...*sacrifices*.”

“I’m sure something could be arranged. I’m a man who knows a thing or two about sacrifice.”

“Virgins, I’m sure,” I said with a laugh.

“Oh, Evie. Real men don’t need virgins.” Luke offered me his hand. When I curled my fingers around his, he grabbed my bag with his free hand and hauled me toward the door. “And you’re tight enough every time I have you, if it wasn’t for how well you suck cock, how would I ever know?”

EVIE

My body ached and burned as I pushed myself through mile three of my run. It always almost felt sacrilegious, jogging in Givenchy, but I supposed now that I was Satan's wife, that was kind of the point.

My morning class had gone as well as it could have. I'd snagged a coffee and a salad from Kerckhoff's for lunch. Now, if I could just keep my body moving until I reached campus again, I'd have just enough time to wash myself off in a bathroom sink and make myself presentable for my meeting with Raph.

But as my heart pounded in my ears and sweat dripped down my forehead, I found myself jogging to a stop long before I hit the corner where I'd have to cross the street.

A strange, new kind of discomfort slithered through my body. It wasn't the run that was causing it, either. The rush of endorphins had hit me toward the end of mile one.

I should have been feeling elated, if a little tired.

Instead, I felt unsettled. Out of sorts.

I felt like something was watching me.

Or, more likely, *someone*.

It wasn't the first time I'd felt this on my run. I knew it probably wouldn't be the last, either.

Back in Catholic school, Sister Mary Martha had once told me that angels were always watching over me.

Now that I knew she was right, I knew exactly how sinister that statement really was.

I pushed myself even harder as I crossed the street and headed up a hill. The world moved past me in a blur as I broke into a sprint.

Was it futile to try and outrun an angel? Probably.

But the treaty between Heaven and Hell that ensured my safety hadn't been broken yet. Luke hadn't kidnapped me this time around. I'd gone into the Inferno of my own free will, which meant that no matter how badly the angels wanted me dead, they couldn't hurt me here on Earth.

If they were going to keep surveillance on me while they tried to think of a better plan of attack, then I figured they might as well get a workout too.

I reached the parking lot outside of Raph's office with my lungs on fire and my legs feeling like Jell-O. I was on the home stretch now—only a hundred meters or less until I was safely indoors once more.

I took as deep of a breath as my chest would allow, then powered forward—just in time to see something dark speeding toward me out of the corner of my eye.

Wheels screeched and squealed against the pavement. The smell of smoking rubber filled the air.

I threw myself to the side just in time to feel the front bumper of a black Bentley kiss my thigh.

It had been a close call. Far too close for my liking.

But thankfully, I seemed to have evaded death—narrowly.

The Bentley's door popped open. "Evelyn?" Raph, of all people, emerged from behind the wheel.

"Raph! God, you scared me!" I laughed as I doubled over, resting my hands on my knees. "I thought I was done for."

"I'm so sorry, Evelyn." Raph's jacket flapped in the breeze as he rushed over to me. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine," I promised between gasps of air. "A little shaken up, maybe. But fine."

"You should be more careful, this is a dangerous world we live in—you're lucky I didn't hit you." Raph laid a hand on my shoulder and let out a breath of relief. "It was like you came out of nowhere."

"I could say the same for you." I laughed again as I straightened. "But it's okay. No harm, no foul."

“Were you running from someone?” Raph tilted his head to the side as his eyes scanned my face. “You’re winded.”

“No,” I said—although I wasn’t entirely sure that was the truth. “Just running. My daily jog, you know.”

“If you say so.” Raph squeezed my shoulder. It took him a second too long to remove his hand from my sweaty tank top. “I’m just glad you’re okay. Give me a second to park and we can head to the office. I’m eager to hear how your research has been going.”

After Raph moved his car into a parking place, we headed toward the building his office was nestled in. Even though Raph was considerably taller than me, I caught him matching my steps, stride for stride.

Raph really was a good-looking guy—but the feeling of his touch on my shoulder lingered a little uncomfortably. Not just because I was married now, either.

I’d been warned about Raph by a few of his colleagues when I chose him as my thesis adviser. They’d told me to keep an eye out for any untoward behavior—and even though I liked Raph, I always made sure to.

There’d never been anything officially unprofessional about the way Raph conducted himself, but when it came to his former grad students... there had been rumors.

Rumors that I would’ve preferred to believe were without truth.

But when I thought back...

There’d been that time at the faculty Christmas party. He’d been drunk, and I’d had a little too much mulled wine myself.

He’d said he was only fixing my skirt. I’d wanted to believe him, too.

Every time I thought back to that night, though...

He’d squeezed my ass—and not on accident, either.

I should have reported him to the administration then, but it hadn’t happened again since. I could have switched advisers, but that would have been...messy, for one thing. It would have embarrassed me to admit why, for another.

Raph knew his classics better than anyone I’d ever met. With his background and mastery of Italian, he was the perfect adviser for my work on Dante’s *Inferno*.

And luckily, there hadn’t been another incident since.

“I suppose congratulations are in order,” Raph said over his shoulder as he opened the door to his office building. He held it politely for me as I

passed. “I’ve never liked Adam for you, of course, but if you’re happy—”

“No one ever liked Adam for me,” I reminded him. “But happy... Yes. I really am. It, uh...it wasn’t Adam that I ended up marrying in Vegas.”

“Really?” Raph arched an eyebrow at me as he brushed past toward his office door. “You didn’t mention in your email. Someone new, then?”

“Not quite.” I remembered what Luke had told my parents when we’d announced the marriage to them. “More like...an old friend. One that I’d been out of touch with for a long time. But when things fell apart with Adam, Luke was there to catch me—and when in Rome...”

“When in Vegas, you mean.” Raph chuckled to himself as he unlocked the door to his office. “It’s a shame that what happens there doesn’t stay.”

“You’re upset at me?” I stumbled back half a step on my heels, a little surprised.

Raph was my thesis adviser, not my life coach. It wasn’t really his place to have opinions on who I married—or how.

“A joke, Evelyn. I’m happy for you. Really.” Raph pushed the door open and stepped aside to usher me in. “When do I get to meet the lucky man?”

“Soon, I hope.” Relief washed through my chest as I entered the office. *A joke.* I just hoped he wasn’t kidding about kidding. “He only just met my parents properly over the weekend.”

“What does he do?” Raph took a seat in the high-backed leather chair behind his desk. “Surely you haven’t married another academic.”

“He’s in business, actually.” I sat down in the chair in front of his desk. It was lower to the floor than Raph’s own chair and had always made me feel a little smaller before him than I would have liked—but it was the only other seat in the room. “He’s a CEO, actually. Self-made and everything.”

“He’ll be able to take care of you, then.” He nodded, appeased. “You’ve done well for yourself, haven’t you?”

“I...” My eyes narrowed as I straightened up my posture as much as I could. There was something...*off* about Raph today. Normally, he didn’t give off such weird, judgmental vibes. “I didn’t marry Luke for his money, if that’s what you’re implying.”

“Of course not. Now.” He pulled out a file folder from one of his desk drawers. When he flipped it open, the title page of my thesis was revealed. “Let’s talk about your progress.”

“About that, actually.” I didn’t want to bring it up now that he was acting all weird, but I supposed this was as good a time as any. “I think I might be shifting direction on it a bit.”

“How much shifting?” He tapped the title page twice as his amber eyes locked on mine. “You have a very good direction already, Evelyn. The way you’ve tied Dante’s placement of his contemporaries in Hell for their sins to modern concepts of social justice culture—it’s a sexy concept.”

I snorted. “I don’t know about sexy...”

“Don’t be ridiculous. You could present this at any conference you wanted and fill the room.”

“Well, I’ve been reading some, ah...supplementary texts, I guess you could say.” A few in Luke’s library...plus a few additional facts that I’d gotten from Luke himself. “I’m beginning to think that a better angle would be paralleling Dante’s choice to punish his enemies in *Inferno* to, well...cancel culture.”

“Cancel culture?” He sniffed. “That’s a little gauche, don’t you think?”

“No,” I said confidently. “It’s worth talking about. I think the way that Dante saw sin and punishment is actually pretty deeply tinted by his own sins—pride, most of all.”

“I can see it,” he admitted. “And you’re right—it *is* interesting. Did you bring me these supplementary texts? I’ll need to read them if you’re planning on using them as references.”

“They’re, um...” *From an original source*, I wanted to tell him, since that was the truth. But I still wasn’t ready to tell my own parents about what Luke really was. Revealing it to Raph in the middle of an already uncomfortable meeting was a bad plan and I knew it. “Historical, mostly, and pretty rare. I’ll have to see if I can get them to you. You might have to settle for scans.”

“I’m always eager for new reading material.” He flipped my thesis open to a page he’d marked with a sticky note. “In the meantime, I wanted to talk to you about some of the translations you’re using in your third chapter. If we made them a little more accurate...”

Raph and I spent the next hour moving between English and Italian. Thankfully, whatever tension had been between us when the meeting began had dissipated by the time he closed my folder again.

“Do you need a ride home?” he offered as I rose. “I’d hate for you to have to run all the way there. You look exhausted, and I know you don’t

drive.”

“I’m living in Vegas now. With Luke.” Raph had driven me back to the place I’d shared with Adam plenty of times before, but I thought he would’ve realized that I wouldn’t dream of continuing to live with my ex. “He’ll pick me up in a bit.”

“In what?” He laughed like he was amused by the notion. “His helicopter?”

I smiled. “Yeah, actually.”

He had the good sense to look impressed instead of judgmental this time. “He takes good care of you, then. I’m glad for it, Evelyn.”

“Thanks, Raph.” After an hour of work together, the weirdness of earlier had finally faded away. Hearing those simple words—*I’m glad for you*—was reassuring. “That means a lot.”

“And you’re...happy with this man? Truly?”

“Yes.” I didn’t even have to think about it—which was a different kind of reassuring, but just as good. “Very happy, actually.”

“And you love him?”

I furrowed my brow. The answer to that was a little more complicated—not because Luke was bad to me or anything. Really, he was perfect in every way I could have ever imagined. In a few ways that I’d previously believed were too impossible to even fantasize about, too.

But the fact of the matter was, our marriage had been a rush job. No matter what I’d told Raph.

I didn’t have all of my memories of past lives like Luke did. He understood that, too.

Could I really be in love with a man I’d only known for a few weeks?

Maybe. That seemed almost...*naive* to admit, even just to myself.

But I could feel how much Luke loved me. He didn’t even have to say it—it was in every look he gave me, every kindness he did.

A love that didn’t need to be spoken.

I really was an English major. I was almost certain I’d read that in a poem once and dreamt that it might be attainable. Realistic. True.

“I just might,” I said, lifting one shoulder in a shrug.

Even admitting that much made it impossible to stop smiling.

Fuck.

I was more of a romantic than I wanted to own up to.

“Good.” Raph gave me a nod as he placed my folder aside. “Then I approve.”

“I didn’t realize I needed your approval.” I turned my head to the side to laugh at that. “But I appreciate it just the same.”

“Then I hope you’ll appreciate some advice just as much.” His amber gaze was suddenly focused and serious. “You should still be careful, Evelyn. Quick marriages like this...well, you’ve read Alexander Pope, haven’t you?”

“Blessed is he who expects nothing, for he shall never be disappointed?” I guessed, quoting Pope.

“No.” Raph shook his head slowly, not breaking my gaze. “For fools rush in where angels fear to tread.”

“Good thing I’m no angel, then.” Luke’s dark voice sounded from the doorway. He came to my side and placed his hand on my waist as he smiled at Raph. He held out his other hand for Raph to shake. “Luke Dawnstar. Nice to finally meet you, Raph.”

“Likewise,” Raph said slowly.

But as he shook Luke’s hand, the expression on Raph’s face betrayed him.

He didn’t look like he thought this was nice at all.

EVIE

When I'd imagined Luke and Raph meeting, I'd envisioned a pleasant encounter. Raph had done a significant amount of academic work on depictions of Satan in classic literature, after all.

It should have been exciting for both of them. Raph, finally shaking hands with the man he'd spent his entire career studying in prose and verse. Luke, meeting a fan.

But like my childhood dreams of owning a unicorn and my aspirations of someday winning a Grammy, some fantasies had been doomed to disappoint me from the get-go.

"You're a lucky man, Mr. Dawnstar." Raph withdrew his hand quickly, like Luke's touch had burned him.

Knowing Luke, that might've actually been true.

"I'm aware," Luke agreed. He smiled down at me with pride. "My missus is quite the catch."

"You must be excited for your honeymoon, then." Raph's voice was wound so tense, I suspected it might break any moment. "I don't suppose you've had a chance to celebrate yet."

"Every day with Evie is a honeymoon of a sort." Luke pressed a kiss to my temple. "But now that you mention it—we *are* planning a grand party to ring in our union when we have the time."

"Luke," I said quietly, in warning.

There was only one party Luke and I had discussed—and it wasn't one that I was sure Raph had any business attending.

If this was how Raph reacted to meeting my husband, the Devil, I didn't want to know how he'd handle watching me take up the title, *Queen of Hell*.

"No less than Evelyn deserves." Raph gave Luke a curt nod. He looked so uncomfortable that it was making me nervous just to be in the same room as him.

"I could give her the world and it'd still be less than she deserves," Luke quipped. "But she *is* my crowning achievement—so alas, I must simply try my best."

Luke! I wanted to snap at him—but I kept quiet.

Raph wasn't stupid. If Luke kept talking about my coronation in puns like this, we wouldn't have to tell him who Luke really was. He'd guess it for himself.

"I'm sure it will be lovely." Raph glanced at the door, obviously as eager to leave as I was—but Luke wasn't finished with him yet.

If it had been with anyone else, on any other day, Luke's behavior might have amused me.

But right now, with Raph, it felt like watching a lion toy with his prey before tearing it apart.

"You should come," Luke offered.

"Oh, no." Raph held up a hand. "I wouldn't dare impose like that."

"You're important to Evie," said Luke. "It'll be no imposition at all."

"Ah...well." I could see the gears turning in Raph's head as he tried to find some way to decline, but Luke was a difficult man to say no to. Raph must have realized it. "Send me the details then, Evelyn. If I'm free, I'll be sure to stop by."

AFTER WE LEFT RAPH, I grabbed my bag from the little cubicle I had there in the building. Luke waited for me outside a bathroom while I changed out of my workout clothes and back into my blouse and skirt.

"Nice man, your professor." Luke chuckled to himself as we left the building, hand in hand.

I tossed an elbow into Luke's ribs with a scowl in return.

"I'll assume I deserved that." Even when I was annoyed with him, I had to admit that it was refreshing to be with a man who could take his

knocks the way Luke could. “Mind telling me why?”

“Because you were *baiting* him, Luke. It’s like you *wanted* him to realize that I’m—” I glanced at two smiling, tanned undergrads as they passed us outside and stopped myself before they could overhear.

“In a deal with the Devil?” Luke waited a beat for the undergrads to go on their way before he spoke. “Married to Satan?”

“Yes, and yes,” I said sternly. “You shouldn’t have invited him to the coronation, and you *certainly* shouldn’t have been...*gloating*.”

“Gloating.” Luke repeated my word back at me like he was curious how it would feel on his tongue. “Is that what I was doing?”

“He’s happy for us, Luke. Or, at least, he was trying to be.” My friends had been immediately accepting of my sudden marriage to Luke, and even my parents—despite Dad’s recent grumbling—had miraculously been okay with the elopement. But I knew better than to expect that everyone would be able to understand without judgment. “He was doing his best—and you were needling at him anyway.”

“He’s in love with you, Evie.” Luke’s tone suggested it was obvious.

“He is not.” I’d never heard anything more ridiculous in my life.

“In lust, then. For some, the two are strikingly similar.”

“You were in his office for five minutes, Luke.” Most of which, Luke had spent misbehaving. “You barely met the man. How can you be so sure?”

“I know the look.” Luke didn’t seem to be of the opinion that he needed to explain himself beyond that.

“Even if that was true—” It wasn’t. It couldn’t be.

The fate of my thesis was in Raph’s hands. For once, I desperately needed Luke to be wrong.

“You’re upset because I’ve invited him to the coronation,” Luke guessed.

“Among other things.”

“Don’t send him the details, then.”

“Then he’ll ask why I didn’t!”

“Tell him we had to cut the guest list.”

“Luke, the problem is that you felt like it was okay to invite him in the first place.” I couldn’t see what was so hard to understand about this. It wasn’t just any party we were planning. It was my coronation to become, quite literally, Queen of the fucking Damned. “First my parents, now my

thesis adviser? Who do you want me to drag to Hell with us next? Should I send Sister Mary Martha an RSVP?”

Luke chuckled. “From the sounds of things, it would confirm a great deal of what she already believed about you.”

“Luke, please be serious. Just for a second.”

“I’m trying, love.” Luke stopped and turned to me. As he took my hands in his and pulled me off the sidewalk, his gaze was sincere. “I understand that all of this—Heaven, Hell, angels, demons—it’s all new and strange and shocking to you. But this is my life, and whether you like it or not, it’s yours too.”

“I *do* like it, Luke.” I glanced away. “Most of the time, at least.”

“And I’m grateful for that,” Luke said. “I’m not trying to push you to show people parts of yourself that you don’t want to, Evie. But this...”

Luke summoned a tiny flame between our hands. It was no bigger than the tip of a match. It licked against my palms, swirling around to trace the lines of my hands, then the lines of his.

“This is you, and this is me. Hell is a part of both of us,” he said softly. “I don’t want you to have to shove pieces of yourself down, hide them from sight, so you can keep performing normalcy for others. That was never part of my design.”

“And what about *my* design, Luke?”

He sighed and folded our hands together, his on the outside, mine within. A tiny wisp of smoke rose from between my palms as the flame was extinguished.

“You’re right,” Luke said. He bowed his head, as if in prayer. “Completely right.”

My eyes narrowed. “Are you being passive-aggressive, or—”

Slowly, a smile formed on Luke’s lips. “Has a man never admitted to you that he was genuinely wrong before, love?”

I bit my lip as I thought about it. “No. I guess not.”

“Well, let this be a first.” Luke stared me down until I met his gaze. “I fucked up. I didn’t like how that man looked at you. I didn’t like the way lust poured off him like he was planning on gathering it up in a wine glass while he tried to figure out a way to make you drink it. So yes, I was gloating. You’re mine, you’re beautiful, you’re desirable, and you’re very worth gloating about.”

“Thank you,” I said slowly. I was still suspicious of all this, but...Luke might have had a point.

Adam had never apologized to me for anything before.

But Luke wasn't Adam, and when Luke said things, he generally meant them.

“I was wrong, and I'll stop pushing,” Luke said—and for a moment I believed it. “But—”

I sighed. “There's always a but, isn't there?”

“I genuinely think you should still consider inviting Raph to the coronation, darling girl.”

“So you can continue rubbing his nose in things?”

“No.” Luke smirked. “Although, given the chance, I can't say I won't want to. But if your Raph is truly an academic of the caliber you believe him to be, then I think he'd be grateful for the opportunity.”

“Of seeing you put a crown on my head while your army of demons looks on?”

“Of seeing proof of concept with his own eyes,” Luke countered. “I've rubbed elbows with plenty of academics in the past. Alchemy with Faust, mathematics with Gerbert of Aurillac...”

“Who?” It was rare that Luke made a reference that I didn't follow, but in this case, I was lost.

“A good man. An even better gambler. Won a game of dice against me once.” Luke shrugged. “You might know him better as Pope Sylvester II.”

“Pope...” I closed my eyes and tried not to smile. I was still frustrated with Luke, but I had to admit—the revelation that there was truth in the story of Pope Sylvester making a deal with the Devil to win the papacy was pretty amusing. “You're terrible, Luke.”

“Positively devilish,” he agreed. He raised my hands to his lips and kissed my fingertips. “Trust me, love. Scholars stumble upon the truth of our universe all the time. They're generally more fascinated than horrified.”

“Raph's different, Luke. And...if we're being honest—”

“We're husband and wife,” Luke pointed out. “I don't see why we shouldn't be.”

“He doesn't seem to like you. I don't think discovering that you're the subject of all his studies will improve his opinion at this point.”

“Well, love, I don’t particularly like him either,” Luke admitted. “But he’s part of your life, which makes him part of mine too. If he can get over his jealousy, he might just learn something.”

I couldn’t help it.

I laughed.

And just like that, the argument was done.

“You should be careful, Luke,” I warned him.

“Should I?”

“I might like arguing with you.” I smiled up at him. “And I might like you jealous even more.”

“Then it’s a damn good thing I know how completely mine you are.” Luke took several steps backward, drawing me behind a tree just off the sidewalk. He pressed his back to it and pulled me against him. My breath caught in my throat as he slid his hand up my thigh beneath my skirt. “You *are* mine, aren’t you?”

“I’m wearing your ring, aren’t I?” I turned my hand around so I could brush the black diamond against Luke’s stubbled cheek.

“You are,” Luke agreed. His hand slid higher up my skirt. “But maybe I’m searching for a little more reassurance than precious metal and priceless jewels.”

A little moan left my throat as Luke slipped his hand between my thighs.

“I don’t think it’s reassurance you’re trying to find beneath my skirt, Luke.”

“No,” Luke admitted. “Maybe not.”

His lips brushed against mine, then claimed them completely. His tongue slipped into my mouth, hot and slick.

My cunt flushed to full heat in an instant.

I wanted him.

I always wanted him.

And here he was, mine to have.

Was it wrong to be making out like this—scandalously, in the middle of campus?

Maybe.

But then again, Luke was my husband.

Maybe this was just what married people did.

I purred against his lips and shifted my hand down to his slacks. My fingers brushed against his cock, hard and thick enough that I could feel it beneath the fabric.

I squeezed it gently, just to let Luke know *exactly* where my mind was at.

He hissed in return—but for once, it wasn't a sexy hiss.

It sounded like he was in pain.

I pulled out of the kiss immediately.

"What's wrong?" I asked—but one glance at his neck answered my question before Luke could.

A white-hot piece of metal—iron, maybe?—was poking out of Luke's neck. Smoke rose up from it, accompanied by the scent of burning flesh.

Luke's lips were twisted in agony.

"What *is* that?"

"Blessed iron." Luke snarled as he took me by the shoulders and turned me, so my back was against the tree instead. He glanced over both his shoulders, brow lowered and shoulders tense. "Get it off me, love. Use your sleeve. And be quick. We're under attack."

Quickly, I tugged the sleeve of my blouse down over my fingers and plucked the metal away from Luke's skin. It didn't seem like it had pierced him—just burned into his flesh upon impact.

I let it drop to the grass at our feet as soon as I felt the heat burning its way through my sleeve.

"I didn't think anything could hurt you here on Earth," I whispered. I craned my neck to look around Luke for the source of the attack, but there was no one in sight. "And UCLA is hardly heavenly ground."

"I can't be killed," Luke corrected me. "But debilitated—yes. And they can certainly make me hurt."

"Who's they?" I still couldn't see anyone, but as Luke covered my body with his, it was hard to see anything beyond his chest. "Angels? If the treaty is still in place, they aren't allowed—"

"Not angels, love." Luke turned around, shielding me with his body. He shifted aside for just a moment, so I could see what he was seeing.

A second ago, there hadn't been anyone anywhere near us. But now, a crowd of humans had gathered across the sidewalk.

They didn't look like assassins, though. Some were just undergrads in sweatpants and UCLA t-shirts. Others I recognized as professors,

secretaries, administrative assistants that worked here.

But as they moved closer, every step taken in unison, I realized that there *was* something off about them.

“What’s wrong with their eyes?” I whispered. If Luke and I had been with William Prescott at the Battle of Bunker Hill, we would’ve been free to fire immediately.

Not a single one of the people approaching us had irises or pupils.

Their eyes were all entirely white.

“Touched by angels,” Luke murmured back.

“You told me that was just a television show, Luke!” I hissed.

“It is. This is different.” Luke growled the words through gritted teeth as flames appeared in his hands. “Their minds have been turned to do angelic bidding—and the angels only want one thing where we’re concerned.”

Luke raised a hand full of flame at the group, but I grabbed his wrist before he could fire.

“Luke, if you hurt them, you break the treaty!” It was the best argument to convince Luke to err on the side of mercy, but not the most important one to me.

These were normal people. Husbands. Mothers. Daughters and sons.

They wouldn’t hurt anyone under normal circumstances.

They weren’t acting of their own free will—and if Luke did attack them right now, his flames would turn them to bone and dust.

“If they get to you, they’ll kill you, Evie.” But despite his words, Luke lowered his hand.

He was rewarded for that kindness by another length of metal. It came sailing at him, thrown like a javelin by a little old lady in a pair of yoga pants and sweatshirt with a cat on it.

She looked innocent. Sweet and mild and kind.

But the way she threw the blessed iron...

It was like she had the strength of *ten* little old ladies in cat sweatshirts.

The iron hit Luke in the shoulder. It burned its way through his jacket and smoked as its tip seared his skin.

It wasn’t the last, either.

Every member of the crowd pulled out their of pieces of iron. The air whistled as they came down on Luke, sticking into him wherever on his

body they landed.

As Luke dropped to his knees, my heart broke. He reminded me of those paintings of Saint Sebastian—pierced through by arrows, so obviously suffering—and doing so beautifully, it hurt all the more to watch.

“Run,” Luke croaked, glancing up at me. “Now, Evie. *Run!*”

“No.” I dropped to my knees with him, frantically trying to pull out all the lengths of iron from his skin. “I’m not leaving you, Luke.”

When I tugged away the one that was embedded in his white button-down, right over his heart, sparkling black liquid bloomed out in its wake.

Infernal blood.

Luke’s blood.

“Evie!” Luke’s voice broke like he was trying to roar my name but didn’t have the strength. His skin, normally so lustrous and healthy, looked ashy and gray.

And still, the group of touched humans came closer. They moved slowly, like they were in some kind of trance.

Like zombies.

They’re coming to get you, Barbara, a little voice whispered in the back of my mind.

It wasn’t wrong, either.

It looked like a scene out of *Dawn of the Dead*.

“Go,” Luke growled at me as I reached for another length of iron.

“Run, damn you!”

“I’m not—” I started, but before I could finish, I felt something cold open up where the tree behind me had been.

A shiver raced down my spine as an arm looped around my waist. A hand shot out, grabbing Luke’s collar.

The second before we were both pulled back into the freezing chill behind us, I noticed that the hand had no color. None at all.

It looked like something out of an old television show. Grayscale. Completely black and white.

EVIE

“**H**elp me get him up.” Don, one of Luke’s trusted demons, let go of my waist and shifted down onto the ground where Luke knelt. His smooth, rich voice echoed strangely in this place—wherever it was.

When I looked down at my hands, they were black and white—just like Don’s.

Everything was black and white here. Mostly black. There was a darkness all around us that seemed to extend indefinitely. Pale mist hung in the air at waist-height. It swirled around Luke’s slumped shoulders, threatening to engulf him entirely.

“Where are we, Don?” I dipped down to Luke’s level as well. Don and I both took one of Luke’s arms and slung it over our shoulders. The heaviness of Luke’s body weighed me down, but I didn’t exercise just for the endorphins.

My legs were strong. Strong enough, at least, to help Don get Luke onto his feet again.

“We’re in the Abyss,” Don explained. “My domain, you could say. Now, I’ll hold him. You take care of the iron. Don’t worry, it will be cold enough to touch here.”

“Good to know.” I grabbed the first length of iron I could find and tugged. Just like Don said, it was cold now. Everything in this place felt close to freezing. I shivered as I dropped the iron onto the ground.

Suddenly, I was grateful for all those long, icy winters in Vermont. It felt like they'd all been preparing me for this moment. For right now.

There were dozens of pieces of iron embedded in Luke's flesh. The first that had hit him came away easily, like they hadn't gone in too deep. But others—the ones that had struck him later—pierced Luke's skin far deeper. When I pulled those ones out, I was greeted by more gushing black blood.

"How did you know we were in danger?" I glanced up at Don while I worked. With his dark, slicked back hair and his sharp suits, Don always had the look of a 1960s businessman about him. It was only enhanced by the fact that there was no color in this place.

"I was in the neighborhood," Don said with a shrug. "Don't worry about it."

"Okay..." I wanted to press Don further about that—had he been the one spying on me earlier, during my run? But there were more important things to deal with right now. "Is Luke going to be okay?"

"Once the iron's out," Don confirmed. "His body will start to heal when it's all gone."

"Far from my first rodeo," Luke mumbled. "You're doing well, love. Just keep going. Imagine you're...picking flowers in the meadow."

"I'm plucking pieces of iron out of my husband's skin," I snapped back at Luke as I tugged a particularly deep piece from his stomach. "Forgive me if I'm not really feeling like stopping to smell the roses right now."

"I'll buy you a bouquet when we're back in Vegas, then." Luke tried to smirk at me, but as he coughed up a mouthful of black blood, even I had to admit the effect was lost. "Two dozen of them. A suitable reward for your efforts."

"It's me who should be buying *you* the flowers, you stupid, stupid man." I shouldn't have been angry with Luke. I supposed I wasn't, really.

I was angry at myself.

Luke had sustained all these injuries protecting me. If he hadn't been shielding me with his body, he wouldn't have been hurt at all.

"If I hadn't been such a stupid man, you'd be dead, love." It was like Luke was reading my mind. Maybe he could. "However much I hurt, it's always worth it as long as you're safe."

I placed my hand on Luke's chest for leverage as I pulled the final piece of iron from his shoulder. He winced and grunted in pain as I did it.

When he stopped wincing, he tried to force a smile—but then his eyes rolled back, and he slumped at Don’s side. Out cold.

“Are you *sure* he’s going to be okay?” I could feel the concern in my eyes as I met Don’s gaze again.

“Have faith, Evie.” Don thumped Luke’s chest twice with his palm. A second later, Luke’s eyes opened again. He was still trying to smile, but it was a dopey grin that lingered on his lips. “Your husband’s made of stronger stuff than you can imagine.”

I bit my lip and hoped Don was right.

I knew I’d died thousands of times because of my ties to Luke—but I didn’t think I’d ever forgive myself if by some horrible twist of fate, this time he ended up dying for me instead.

Don glanced over his shoulder and cleared his throat.

“We should move,” he said, taking a step forward. Luke stumbled alongside him, doing his best to work his feet. “It’s not good to linger in one place in the Abyss for too long.”

“Why?” I asked, but Don didn’t answer.

He didn’t have to.

As we moved through the Abyss, I realized the answer for myself soon enough.

The blackness around us wasn’t as endless as I’d first thought. As we moved forward, it faded out into grayscale as well.

I saw trees, buildings, roads and cars and people walking their dogs. They were all in black and white too. There was a fuzzy quality to them all, like they were behind some kind of filter. A veil.

Our surroundings were like a dark reflection of Los Angeles. Of Earth itself.

Not all the people here seemed so distant and fuzzy, though. Some moved near us, floating as they encircled us. They were transparent. By comparison, the more distant people looked incredibly solid. Real.

These others looked like ghosts. When one, a woman in a beautiful Victorian gown with a feather in her hair, reached out to touch me, I tried to jerk away.

It didn’t matter, though. Her fingertips passed through my arm, leaving nothing but chill behind.

“What are they?” I asked Don.

“Phantoms,” Don said. “Reflections of the people they once were.”

“So...ghosts are real.” I watched the spectral woman’s face as we passed her. She stared at me with curiosity but didn’t try to touch me again.

“In a way,” said Don. “The ones who live in this place are lost souls. People who weren’t offered places in Heaven or Hell or anywhere else—or people who turned one or both down. People with no other religion to guide them to a final resting place.”

“Oh, ye of little faith,” Luke mumbled.

“Are they...in pain?” I tried to search the eyes of a tall man in a pair of boots and a cowboy hat as he floated around us in a circle, but they seemed strangely vacant. “What do they want?”

“They don’t hurt. Don’t worry. They don’t want, either.” Don cocked his head for the cowboy ghost to move aside. With a tip of his hat, the ghost floated away again. “They continue on with their lives as best they can here. Some are even reunited with their loved ones. But without guidance—without anything to believe in—they’re...confused. Fascinated by the living. Unsure of how they’re different and why they can’t truly join in with the rest of the world as it moves on without them.”

“That’s...sad. I think.” If these people could be reunited with their loved ones, I supposed their afterlives couldn’t be all that bad. But there was something strangely joyless about this place, too.

That, I decided, was the reason that Don hadn’t wanted to linger.

This place sucked all the delight out of the world. The air I breathed in didn’t smell of anything. Without color, without warmth...

There were worse places to end up, probably, but I wouldn’t have wanted to be here for the rest of eternity. That was for sure.

“There are other afterlives?” I tried to focus on conversation—if not for my benefit, then for Luke’s. I could tell his pain was slipping away, but the nothingness all around us felt like the kind of thing that could take hold in the place of pain. I wasn’t sure which was really worse: hurting, or not feeling at all. “You said there were other faiths that could have guided these people.”

“Remind me to take you to Valhalla when this business with the angels is finally done,” Luke mumbled. His eyes were closed, but he was leaning on Don less now. His feet seemed to be working better now, too. “We can drink mead from fountains that never cease to flow.”

“Hades, Olympus, Nirvana, Avalon...” Don listed more afterlives like he was reciting them for an exam. “There’s the Seelie Court, the Unseelie...more realms than are worth keeping track of, really.”

“Heaven, Hell, and Earth,” said Luke. “Those are the ones we concern ourselves with for now. But Valhalla, when this is over—could be fun.”

“Valhalla when this is over,” I agreed—more to appease Luke right now than out of any desire to party with Vikings.

He was improving. I could see it with my own eyes.

But the way Luke’s shirt was still stained black with his blood made my hands tremble. I had to clench them into fists to stop them from shaking.

He’d told me that he couldn’t be killed by mere humans. I believed him.

But even just seeing him hurt so badly like this...

It made fire tear through my chest. It felt like my heart had been crushed by some massive fist.

If this was what it felt like when Luke was hurt, I couldn’t imagine the pain he felt every time he’d watched me die.

As Don brought us to another dark place in the Abyss, I clenched my jaw and decided then and there.

Luke was right.

What had happened during my coronation in Paris could *never* happen again.

“Through here.” Don pushed Luke toward me gently. Luke’s arm slipped from Don’s shoulders, freeing Don’s hands.

Slowly, Don reached into the blackness that surrounded us—and the darkness reached back in return. Tendrils of black curled around Don’s fingers, caressing his skin, as he took hold of the dark between them and pulled it apart.

Light flooded from the gap. It was blinding for a moment, but when my eyes adjusted, I recognized the couches and fireplace I could see through it.

I wound my arm around Luke’s waist, letting him lean on me as we stepped through the tear—straight into the living room of Luke’s penthouse suite in the Inferno.

Don’s powers really were something else. We couldn’t have been in the Abyss for more than ten minutes tops—maybe less.

I'd have to remember that for the next time I was late for class. Not even Luke's helicopter traveled that fast.

"Get him on the couch." Don moved around it and grabbed the decorative pillows. He tossed them aside and waved me forward.

Luke limped at my side as we moved to the couch. I kept my hand on his back as I helped him down onto it.

"How bad off am I?" Luke glanced up at Don, but he didn't look worried. "Dead yet?"

"Not yet." Don stepped aside to light up a cigarette. A faint scent of cloves and tobacco drifted from the smoke as he took a puff. "But I'd rather we didn't repeat that, if it's all the same to you."

Luke closed his eyes and nodded. "Just remember, if I ever do pass, you agreed to play "Another One Bites the Dust" at my funeral."

"Did you really?" I cocked an eyebrow at Don as I dropped to my knees at Luke's side.

Don chuckled. "And Mal promised to wear a red dress."

"You're not allowed to die, Luke." I spread Luke's jacket and started unbuttoning his shirt. He didn't have nearly as many wounds as I expected. There were a few pink marks, like already fading scars, across his abs. The few places that were still open weren't bleeding anymore.

He was healing.

I didn't know if it was right to, but I was tempted to thank God for that.

"Satisfied with your inspection, nurse?" Luke smirked up at me. "Or were you just looking for an excuse to take my shirt off?"

"Both, soldier." I placed a hand on his chest, right over his heart so I could feel it beating. The rhythm was a little irregular still, but nice and strong. "You should have told me about the blessed iron. I didn't know there were things like that. Things that could hurt you."

"It wouldn't have changed anything—but I suppose you're right." Luke folded his hand over mine, holding it to his heart. "Blessed iron comes from the gates of Heaven. It's the only thing that can pierce the skin of the Fallen."

"Or kill a demon, for that matter," Don added. He'd smoked his cigarette down to a stub. I wondered where he'd put it out at for a moment—Luke didn't smoke and didn't have ashtrays as a result—but then Don stoked the air with a single fingertip, creating another tear in reality. He tossed the cigarette butt into the Abyss, then waved his hand to close to the

hole again. “Which is why I’d suggest that Evie stay here in the Inferno for a while. We’re lucky it was only Luke that was hurt.”

“Are we?” I ran my hand down Luke’s chest. His wounds were healing right before my eyes, but he still looked exhausted. “I’m not so sure about that.”

“Don could’ve been hurt rescuing us. Killed, even.” Luke moved his hand away from his chest as he sat up. He looked down at me, suddenly stern. “Worse, we could have lost you.”

“Don’t look at me like that.” I returned Luke’s stern look with an even sterner one. “You’re the one who decided to play hero.”

“And if I hadn’t, you would’ve been playing human sacrifice,” Luke countered. He took my chin in his hand and held it there, even when I tried to turn my face away. “Next time, when I tell you to run, you run, love. You’re still human. Most vulnerable of us all.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I furrowed my brow. “*Still* human?”

Luke was saved from having to answer that particular question by a little buzz from my phone.

“Raph checking in?” Luke joked—though I was still a little stunned that after what he’d been through today, he was able to joke about anything at all.

“No.” I found myself smirking at Luke’s teasing without meaning to as I read over the text. “It’s Bea wanting to know if we’re still at UCLA. She had a hot date tonight, but I guess he’s bailed on her. She needs a ride home.”

“Helicopter’s still there,” Luke said with a tired shrug. Maybe today’s events had gotten to him after all. “She’s welcome to fly it back herself.”

“That doesn’t sound like Bea’s style.” Bea, along with my friends, Joan and Ava, were all living here in the Inferno with me to keep them safe from anything the angels might decide to throw their way. I hadn’t even realized that Bea was in Los Angeles today—and as bad as it felt to strand her there, I knew that asking her to fly back on her own would turn out even worse.

Bea was one of the most capable people I knew, but she’d grown up almost as wealthy as Luke was.

She wasn’t used to flying helicopters—she was used to being flown in them.

“I’ll go,” Don offered abruptly. I felt a chill and realized he’d already opened up the Abyss again. He looked a little flustered—which was unlike him—but after the attack, I supposed he had every right to be. “If the angels are active in Los Angeles today, Bea isn’t any safer there than Evie is.”

“That’s very kind of you, Don.” Especially since we all knew *exactly* how Bea felt about him. While at first, I’d suspected there might be chemistry between them, in the last few weeks I’d been proven incredibly wrong.

I hadn’t seen Bea and Don in the same room together without one or both of them taking digs at the other. Bea had come to the conclusion that Don was an arrogant, faux-suave asshole, and Don was of the opinion that Bea was a spoiled, entitled princess.

Sometimes, when I heard the way they snipped at each other, I suspected that neither of them were completely wrong.

“Luke...” Don paused halfway through the Abyss. It left half his body in technicolor, half in black and white. “Don’t take this the wrong way, but...”

Luke nodded as Don’s voice trailed off, like he already knew exactly what Don meant.

“I’ll take care of it,” Luke assured Don. “She won’t like it, but you have my word.”

“Your word for what?” I glanced between the two of them in confusion.

Don gave me a look of apology and disappeared into the Abyss without another word.

Luke, on the other hand, was staring back at me sternly again.

“Luke, what was that about?” I didn’t like the sensation that a conversation had just taken place in some language I didn’t speak.

I liked the little glint of wickedness in Luke’s eyes as he considered his answer even less.

“Well, love, it’s simple.” Luke sighed as he pushed himself to his feet. He offered me his hand and pulled me up off my knees as well. “More importantly, it has to be done.”

“What has to be done?” Luke’s half-answers were almost as infuriating as no answer at all.

“You misbehaved today, love. Badly. And it’s far from the first time, too.”

“Misbehaved?” I blinked, surprised. Whatever I’d been expecting to hear, it certainly hadn’t been that. “You can’t seriously think that it’s my *fault* we were attacked.”

“No, Evie. That’s not your sin at all.”

“Then what is?”

Luke cupped my cheek in his hand and brushed his thumb along my cheekbone. “I told you to run, and you disobeyed me. You put yourself in danger over nothing—”

“I wasn’t going to just leave you there!” Abandoning Luke hadn’t even seemed like a possibility at the time. “You were outnumbered, injured... Luke, you couldn’t even fight back!”

“More importantly,” Luke continued, “you broke our vows. That, darling girl, is your sin.”

My mouth fell open slightly.

He was right, I supposed...but how?

It was a surprise to me that I’d managed to disobey Luke. Ever since we’d pledged ourselves to each other, I hadn’t been able to help myself when it came to following Luke’s orders. But I supposed in the moment of the attack, with tensions and tempers running high, I’d somehow managed it.

“I didn’t think you were in the punishment business, Luke.” I took a step back, eyes narrowed, heart racing. “I thought the Inferno was a place of pleasure, not pain.”

“Some sins must be punished.” Luke didn’t try to look apologetic about it. If anything, the wicked glint in his eyes was even brighter now. He took a step forward, closing the gap between our bodies again. “Oath-breaking is one.”

“Punished *how*, Luke?” I took another step backward, but for every inch I moved away, Luke just moved an inch closer.

Luke smirked. His face was still far too pale, and his shirt was still stained with his blood, but that infernal smile of his made him look like he was just as powerful as ever as he moved it down to brush against my ear.

“I’m going to spank you, love,” Luke breathed in a dark whisper. “And I think I might enjoy it, too.”

EVIE

My heartbeat was fluttering so fast, I could hardly tell one beat from another.

Luke was going to spank me. I knew this. I knew it in my chest, and in my bones, and I *especially* knew it between my legs.

What I didn't know was how I felt about it.

On one hand, I had no intention of being disgraced by being taken over Luke's knee and having my ass smacked like I was some kind of misbehaving child.

On the other...

Well.

The wetness currently pooling against the lace of my panties said more about that than I had the words to explain.

"This is how you punish your wife, then." I moved around the couch slowly, putting it between Luke and me. "What happened to love and protect?"

"Oh, Evie. I still love you. Believe that much." Luke moved slowly too. His shirt hung open, still unbuttoned from when I'd checked his wounds. Beneath it, his firm, muscled chest was still blotched with marks from the blessed iron. "As for protecting you...some forms of protection are a little harder to swallow than others. You'll learn that by the time I'm done."

As Luke circled the couch, I moved away from him at the same slow, steady pace. My breaths were deeper right now than they'd been a few moments ago. My chest heaved as each rose and fell beneath my breasts.

"If you spank me, I'll hate you for it," I warned him. It was probably at least half true, too. I didn't like anything about the little exchange that Luke and Don had just had.

If Luke wanted to spank me for fun, that was one thing.

If he was doing it because Don expected him to...

That was something else entirely.

"I won't disobey you again, Luke." It was a promise that I knew I could keep. Especially as I now knew that as much Luke lavished me with praise and pleasure, he could punish me just as thoroughly. "I thought you were in danger. I thought I was going to lose you. Knowing that, you can understand why I didn't run, can't you?"

"I can, Evie. Of course I can." We continued to circle the couch. Luke's hands gripped the back of it while I moved slowly in front of the cushions on the other side. "But that doesn't mean there's not form to consider."

"You can shove your form up your ass, Luke." Luke was staring at me through the eyes of a predator. One who would enjoy nothing more than to sink his teeth into my flesh while his hand came down against my backside.

Fighting him on this was the only thing stopping me from feeling like prey.

"It's not my arse on the line right now, love." Luke clicked his tongue as he slowly shook his head. "You broke a vow. A sacred one. It's the greatest sin there is—and there's only one manner of recourse."

"I'm Catholic, Luke," I reminded him. My feet crossed as I edged my way around the couch, like a ballerina practicing barre. "When we sin, we confess, we repent, and we're forgiven."

"And I'm the King of Hell." Luke chuckled darkly. "You're in the ninth circle, Evie. There is only one way to repent here."

"As if you've never broken a vow before." Luke hadn't exactly been pushed out of Heaven for jaywalking, after all.

"Not to you, love." Luke paused, licked his lips, and stared me down intensely. "Never to you."

Luke moved first, a second before I could react. His form was a blur as he rushed at me.

I tried to run, but it was pointless.

I was human. Slow. Fragile.

Easy to kill.

Easy prey.

Luke, on the other hand...

He was everything short of a god.

He caught my wrist before I could flee. He twirled me, like we were dancing.

Or at least, like he was.

I was clumsy in my struggle. I tripped and stumbled straight into his chest. But as Luke captured me, his every move was so graceful, calculated and elegant, he might as well have been my partner in a waltz.

"You fight me, it'll make it worse." Luke held both my wrists as I pressed my hands to his chest to steady myself. When I looked up at him, afraid, his gaze was cold steel.

Like an executioner's.

It was then that I knew my every struggle against him had been doomed from the start.

I tried to raise my hand to slap him, but he held my wrists too tightly.

I could barely move either of them an inch before he jerked them back into place.

All my efforts earned me was a dark smirk from Luke's gorgeous lips.

"All right, love." He bent down quickly to steal a kiss from my lips. "Have it your way."

In the next moment, Luke dropped his shoulder, and my feet were no longer on the floor. He lifted me up and carried me off toward the bedroom. I pounded my fists against his back, but it was no use.

He'd caught me.

I was at his mercy now.

"You *bastard*," I snarled at him as he threw me down onto the bed.

Luke merely shrugged off his jacket and threw it across the room.

"Oh, love. You're so very right." Luke grabbed my ankle as I tried to scramble away from him across the mattress. He pulled me toward him with a quick, sharp *yank*. "But if I'm not pretending that I won't enjoy this, you shouldn't be either."

"I'm *not*!" I tried to kick him, but that only made him laugh as he took my other ankle in his hand and spread my legs.

I froze as Luke's hand slid up my knee and across my inner thigh. From the way he smiled when he cupped my sex over the lace of my panties, I knew exactly what he felt there.

Heat. Humidity. Wetness.

One look in his eyes told me that he knew.

"You're going to be queen soon, Evie." Luke removed his hand from my cunt and shifted it to my hip. "Best learn now to only lie when you have to."

"I'm *not* lying." The world rolled around me as Luke flipped me over, face down on the mattress. I arched my back, straining to get back up, but Luke only had to put the slightest pressure on my spine to keep me down.

He crouched down at the edge of the bed behind me, putting him eye level with my backside, as he ran his hand down the small of my back and over the curve of my ass.

"Not lying, eh?" He didn't sound convinced.

A quick shift of his grip to my knees let him pull them apart. He moved up onto the mattress and pressed his own knee between my legs to keep them spread. One hand wrapped around my left ankle.

The other slipped between my thighs again. This time, he didn't just cup my pussy.

This time, he worked his fingers beneath my panties and traced the line of my slit himself.

"Not lying," he said again. His fingers withdrew again. I could hear him suck them into his mouth, tasting my wetness. "Oh, Evie."

"I'm *not*, Luke."

With a sharp movement and a sudden snarl, Luke took the hem of my skirt in his hands and ripped it apart with a single twitch of his wrists.

"You are." He tugged the skirt out from under me and tossed it across the room. As he sat down on the bed next to me, he took my waist into his hands and pulled me across his thighs like I weighed nothing at all. "But if you're insisting on lying, love, you may as well lie across my lap until the deed is done."

I tensed immediately as Luke's warm, callused palm stroked over my ass again. He caressed my left cheek roughly, rubbing it until it was flushed with heat.

Was I afraid of this? Absolutely. Luke was powerful. Stronger than any man I'd ever known. And ruthless, too.

I had no doubt that once he started with my punishment, it was going to hurt.

But it wasn't just fear that pounded through my body as he raised his hand over my left cheek.

I let out a sigh of relief as he moved his hand to my right cheek instead.

He was teasing me, and I loved it.

He was going to hurt me...

And somewhere, in the deepest, most primal parts of my brain, I loved that too.

I knew I'd done wrong, breaking the vow to obey. Normally, it was so impossible, it hadn't even struck me that I'd done it at all. Not in the moment.

And now, knowing that Luke could heal from even the ravaging of two dozen lengths of blessed iron burned into his skin, in hindsight it seemed like such a ridiculous order to disobey.

"Are you ready, love?" Luke's voice washed over me, smooth and comforting despite the way I knew he was about to send pain rippling across my skin.

I bit my lip as I felt tears well up in my eyes. "Do I have a choice?"

"No," Luke said—almost apologetically. "But if you need a moment to compose yourself, I'll give you one."

I took a deep breath. "That's kind of you."

"I can be brutal and kind in the same breath." Luke raised his hand over my ass again. "Just like you can be furious with me and still soaking fucking wet."

I exhaled and nodded. "Do it, then."

Beneath me, Luke's cock twitched against my stomach as he brought his hand down across my left ass cheek.

The pain was intense and immediate. It seared across my flesh and made me cry out as soon as his palm made contact.

But it wasn't *just* pain.

The heat gathered and pooled in my core. It lapped at my clit and gushed through my G-spot like a molten wave.

Not of pain, but of pleasure.

"Count them for me, love."

“Why?” I rasped. Tears welled up on my lower lash line, though I didn’t know why I was crying.

“Because it will give you something to focus on, darling girl.” Luke rubbed at the place where he’d spanked me. With every firm circle he made, he eased the pain. “And because it will keep me from getting carried away.”

The next smack resonated through my other cheek before I could answer him. I cried out at that one too, but this time, I was able to muffle the sound.

I’d never been so confused about my feelings in all my life. Pleasure. Pain. Indignance. Desire.

All rolled into one.

“Two,” I panted.

Obviously, I’d never been spanked as a child. I didn’t know how many smacks Luke would make me endure, but even just the two I’d received so far hurt my pride—and made me regret what I’d done, too.

I braced for the third slap as Luke rubbed my other ass cheek. My tears tumbled down my face, hot and saline.

A true sign of my shame.

I wasn’t crying because it hurt. The pain was intense, but over quickly.

I was crying because of *everything*.

Because of the angels who wanted to kill me. Because of the devil I’d married to try and stop my own death. Because of the way my life had been pulled out from under me so fast, I still hadn’t really had a chance to process it, let alone learn my place in the new reality that I’d been dealt.

I cried because I was sorry, and I cried because the only reason I had to be sorry at all was how close it felt like I’d come to losing Luke today.

I hadn’t even told him that I loved him yet—not properly—but the thought of Luke being snuffed out of existence forever had been enough to shatter my heart and force me into breaking my vows.

I blinked and sniffed, waiting for Luke’s hand to descend against my skin again.

But as I caught my breath, another blow didn’t come.

“We’re on three, Luke.” My voice was tight and pathetic as I forced the words through my tears. “Just get it over with. Please.”

But even then, Luke didn’t spank me again.

A long silence followed as Luke continued to rub the flushed skin that burned just beneath the edge of my panties.

I wondered what he was thinking. I was desperate to ask him—but I didn't know if I could.

"No more crying, love." Luke's voice brought a sigh of relief up out of my lungs.

If anything was more awful than being spanked by Luke like a naughty child, it was listening to that silence as he gave me nothing at all.

"I'm sorry." I was shaking. It made my voice tremble—and forcing out the apology only made me cry even harder. "I'm trying not to. Honest."

"I know, darling girl." Luke hooked his fingers beneath my panties and tugged them down. After he'd eased them away from my ankles, he dropped them to the floor. "I know."

I braced for impact yet again. My panties had been lacy and thin, but they'd protected my ass a little from Luke's blows.

Now, I didn't even have that to shield my skin. Come morning, I suspected I'd be able to look over my shoulder in the mirror and see his handprint emblazoned on my ass—and that was only after two smacks.

Any more and I wondered if I'd ever be able to sit down again.

I clenched my eyes shut, willing myself to stop crying as I waited for the next smack to resound. I felt Luke move his hand into position, and without meaning to, I flinched. Hard.

When Luke's hand came down again, there was no smack.

Instead, Luke lifted my hips up and eased me off his lap.

"Shh. You don't need to be afraid, love. We're done now. You've had enough."

His body shifted, stretching out alongside mine.

There weren't tears in Luke's eyes, but there was something a little broken in them where tears could have been.

"I'm sorry," I whispered, rolling to face him.

Luke wiped away my tears with his thumb. "Sorry for what, love?"

"For disobeying you." I had some sense now of how much our vows meant to Luke. "For not being able to take more. If you were planning on stopping at two, you wouldn't have made me count."

I had an even better sense of what breaking them could make him do.

"Is that why you're crying?" he asked, his voice suddenly gentle as a night breeze. Soft, warm and sweet. "Because you're sorry, or because you

feel weak?”

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “I’m just...crying, I think.”

“I went too hard on you, love. If it’s from the pain...” Luke glanced down at his hand and made a fist with it. “I’m the one who should be sorry. I meant to punish you. Not to hurt you. Not like this.”

“Luke...” I couldn’t help it. Through my tears, a laugh leapt from my lips. “I only made it through two measly swats. I’m just...I’m a wimp.” I closed my eyes and rubbed my cheek against his touch. “I’m sorry for that, too, I guess. I get why you had to punish me. I just wish I’d been able to take it better.”

“You’re not weak, Evie. You took two swats from the Devil himself.” When I opened my eyes again, Luke’s smile greeted me. “I wouldn’t have been surprised if you’d begged for mercy after just one.”

“My pride’s been injured enough without begging, I’m afraid.” My ass still burned from those two swats, one on each cheek.

“Stubborn girl.” Luke ran his hand from my cheek all the way down my body, tracing the curves of my sides. “Let’s see if we can’t fix that, then.”

“And how do you plan on doing that?”

Luke shifted closer to me. He pulled me into his arms and rolled me on top of him as his lips brushed against mine.

“Ride me, love,” he purred against my mouth. “Just how you like it.”

He didn’t have to ask me twice.

I took his cock out far too greedily. I needed something to focus on other than the pain, and Luke was a perfect distraction. His shaft was thick enough, I struggled to wrap my hand all the way around it.

When I positioned myself over it and shifted my hips down to take him inside me, my cunt stretched and struggled in much more rewarding ways.

Struggling against Luke as he made me atone for my sins was one thing. Struggling to take all nine inches of him without dissolving into an orgasmic cloud of pheromones and bliss was another entirely.

I could only move slowly. Every shift of my body had to be made with care. If I let my heels brush against my backside, it stung like I’d just gotten another swat from Luke’s hand.

In other words, it hurt like Hell.

“Careful, love.” Luke rubbed my ass lovingly while I hissed from a bad choice of movement. “Go slow. Focus on feeling good. You don’t need

to please me. Only yourself.”

“I like pleasing you.” *Even when he’d just tanned my hide to Hell and back.* “You’re fun to please—and it pleases me to go fast.”

“Not tonight, it doesn’t.” Luke sucked his lower lip beneath his teeth as an idea glimmered in his eyes. “Come here. If it’s moving that’s a problem for you, I don’t mind being the one who does all the work.”

My breasts pressed against Luke’s chest as he wrapped his arms around me. I kissed his lips and wound my arms around his neck in turn.

Every time I kissed him, he shifted his hips up to give me another delicious thrust from his cock. Pleasure pounded through me, slow and sweet, but no less intense for it.

There was an orgasm building inside me, but not like any orgasm Luke had ever given me before. This one was gradual. Like a volcano preparing to erupt—first, the smoke, then the rumbling, then... the explosion.

If I closed my eyes, I could even see the sparks fly.

“Fuck,” I breathed, riding every wave of molten euphoria with a tired, lazy roll of my hips. My body felt liquid too now. The pain was gone—for the moment, at least. “I love you.”

“Mm.” Luke purred and held me tighter as he nuzzled my neck. “And I do love hearing you say that. But for the next one—”

“The next one?” My eyes widened for a moment. “We’re not done?”

“Oh, no, darling. I said you should please yourself.” Against my neck, I felt a flash of a smirk. In the next second, Luke had both of my wrists in his hands. He pinned them to my back as his hips began to move again, harder and faster this time. “I didn’t say I wouldn’t be pleasing myself too. And this time, you don’t come until I do. That’s an order.”

I shuddered as already I could feel another thunderous orgasm rumbling in preparation, ready to arrive in the wake of the first.

“And if I can’t stop myself?” I whimpered, suddenly worried.

“Then I’d fucking better hear you beg for my mercy,” Luke growled. “And I’d fucking better hear how much you love me again.”

I dug my nails into his shoulder, hanging on for dear life. When Luke was only after my pleasure, he could be as gentle and sweet as he liked.

But when it came to his own...

One way or another, I knew I was going to get it rough.

I hissed and sighed and bit my lip as I felt myself nearing a peak again. My pussy was soaked. Every inch of me felt like it was throbbing,

glowing. Radioactive. About to explode.

“Now,” Luke growled in my ear. He sank his teeth into my neck—he never seemed to forget how much I loved that—and simultaneously, we let go together.

Our bodies detonated as one.

Luke’s cum shot up into me, gushing and filling me until it was dripping down in a pool between us. My cunt gripped and released him rapidly, like it was trying to milk his balls for every last drop.

When his teeth finally left my neck, his mouth found a new home against my lips. He kissed me passionately as he released my wrists, tongue dancing electrically against mine.

A wicked thought caught in my mind as my own orgasm continued to wrack my body. With my hands freed once more, they could do whatever they wanted.

Including, but not limited to, wrapping themselves around Luke’s neck.

He gasped as I straightened and took over control. If my ass still hurt—and in the morning, I was sure it would all over again—I didn’t notice. I didn’t care.

I rolled my hips against his, riding out both of our orgasms even long after they were done.

“If you ever put yourself in danger like that again for me,” I purred down at him, relishing the look of surprise in his eyes. My hands tightened around his throat, just for a moment. “I will kill you, Luke. And I’ll enjoy it, too.”

We stared at each other for along moment. Neither of us spoke. Neither of us moved.

For a while I wasn’t sure that either of us even breathed.

Then, finally, I smiled at him, satisfied, and he let out a laugh.

“Come here,” he ordered, pulling my lips down to his again. “Kiss me, you gorgeous, dangerous thing.”

I did kiss him. Perfectly. Achingly. I treated every movement of my lips against his like a means of sealing a promise. One that I meant.

“You scared me today, Luke. So fucking bad.” I pulled away from his lips to bury my face in the crook of his neck. “I’m not kidding. I never want that to happen again. And if it does, don’t think that I won’t kill you myself on the spot.”

He laughed as he pulled the blankets over us, cocooning us in their warmth.

“I’m sure you will, love,” he murmured back at me. “And I’ll love watching you try.”

EVIE

My ass was killing me. The soreness in my backside radiated as I rolled over in my sleep. As the ache of Luke's punishment throbbed through my muscles, it was enough to stir me awake.

"Good morning, love." Luke swept into the room with an espresso in one hand and a plate bearing a golden, flaky croissant in the other. His eyes were bright, and his smile was even brighter. "How did you sleep?"

"Not as well as you did, apparently." I rubbed my eyes as Luke slipped back into bed with me. "If I didn't know better, I'd never guess that you almost died yesterday."

"Only injured, darling. Don't forget that." Luke held the espresso out to me. "Drink up. It'll help."

"Is this your way of saying sorry for paddling my backside?" Two swats. If that was all it had taken to leave me aching like this, I hated to think what would have happened if Luke had given me more.

"I'm not sorry for doing it," Luke admitted. "But I am sorry it had to be done."

His eyes were full of love and sweetness as he watched me sip at the espresso. It was rich, chocolatey, and hot enough to make me feel at least a little more alive.

"Well, I certainly learned my lesson," I grumbled. Making love to Luke after everything that had happened yesterday had been gorgeous, but now that I realized I'd still be healing from my punishment for a while, I

wished I'd dug my nails a little harder into his shoulders while I came. "No more disobeying. No more breaking vows."

"Good girl." Luke took the espresso cup from me after I'd drained it and offered me the croissant instead. "Now, eat up. We've a busy day ahead of us."

"A busy day of standing, I hope." I frowned as I shifted my weight from one side of my ass to the other. Even with the cushioning of the plush mattress beneath me, it was hard to get cozy.

"Yes, actually. Roll over first, though." Luke pulled the blankets back and took my hip in his hand. "I'll see what I can do to make you more comfortable."

"You're going to heal me?" That sounded...nice. Luke had done it before, erased dozens of scratches and bruises just by running his hands over my skin.

"As much as I'd like to, love..." Luke sighed as he ran his hands over my sore ass cheeks, massaging and caressing them. "I'm afraid I can't. Not completely, anyway."

"So your powers aren't quite infinite, then." Aftercare for spanking was a strange place for Luke's abilities to end, but what did I know?

The Inferno was in Hell, after all. In the midst of all its pleasures, there was obviously a secret appreciation for just desserts here too.

"It's not that." Luke rose and crossed to the vanity. When he returned, he had lotion with him. He rubbed it between his palms, warming it up, before he smoothed it over my sore muscles and bruised skin. The effect was pleasantly tingly—like vanilla-scented IcyHot.

"Mm." I closed my eyes and luxuriated in the feeling for a moment. "Then what's stopping you?"

"The others." Luke smoothed the remainder of the lotion down the backs of my thighs. "Don knows you needed seeing to. Now, the others will be eager for the aftermath."

"You think he went and told the other demons that I broke our vows?" I frowned at the thought. I didn't like the idea of being gossiped about—good or bad.

"I imagine he's probably cracked a joke or two about how you'll be walking today. It'll be enough. Word travels fast in Hell."

"I thought Don liked me." My frown deepened. Though entirely friendly at first, Luke's demons were quickly turning out to be a little

more...well, *demon-like* than I'd originally thought.

"I'm sure he does like you, love." Luke bent over to place a kiss on my ass. It burned even hotter than the lotion—but in a nice kind of way. "He liked Joan Crawford too—but that didn't stop him from having a laugh when she was punished for that smear campaign she ran against Bette Davis."

"So they're all down here laughing at me. Don, Mal, the Fallen..." Legion, Luke's self-replicating female demon friend, might take a little pity on me, and I'd never known The Fourth, Luke's unholy biker friend, to so much as chuckle, but when it came to everyone else...

I sighed.

My suffering was probably hilarious to them.

That made me grumpier than any number of spankings from Luke ever could.

"They're fallen angels and demons, darling girl. As am I." Luke squeezed my ass—a little cruelly, but nothing I couldn't handle—then rose from the bed. "Finish your croissant, get some workout gear on, and meet me on the seventh floor. You can shower when we're done. I imagine you'll need it."

"Might?" I rolled over carefully to watch Luke as he made his way to the door. His dark gray sweatpants, so unlike Luke's normal wardrobe of designer suit pants, somehow made his ass look even better. The white t-shirt he wore fell over his muscular back in a way that almost made me forgive him for being so rough with me—almost. "What are we doing there?"

"You promised Lock you'd start working on your control of your powers." Luke paused in the doorway, turned back and gave me a smirk. "And now that we've had a little taste of what we'll be up against, there's no time like the present to start."

Once Luke was gone, I took my time getting ready. I didn't have much of a choice, really. Even with the nice lotion he'd worked into the soreness of my backside, walking was a little more uncomfortable than I would have liked it to be.

Two fucking swats. I hoped Luke was right, and they really had been something entirely demonic.

I certainly wasn't going to put myself in a position to earn any more.

I was in no hurry to get down to Might—not in my current state. I took slow, luxurious bites of the flaky, buttery croissant Luke had brought me while I waited for the caffeine from the espresso kick in. Only when I felt my brain buzzing did I work my way out of bed and to the dresser so I could put some clothes on.

I donned a matching Calvin Klein bra and thong set, then wrestled my way into a pair of black leggings. Socks, oversized sneakers, and an oversized windbreaker completed the look.

The sneakers were so big and chunky, they made my legs look longer and slimmer. The leggings hugged my ass in a way that made the pain from my punishment hurt a little less. But as I moved to the vanity mirror, twisting my hair into a long fishtail braid as I walked, I knew that Don and the others would still be satisfied with the awkwardness in my gait.

Of course, demons *would* find it hilarious that their future queen had been spanked last night.

I hoped it would be worth it to them when I scorched their asses when I got down to Might.

I smeared on a little lip balm, some deodorant, and spritzed myself with a little La Prairie body spray for luck. The smell of grapefruit made me feel a little more awake, and the cardamom was comforting.

Given the day I'd had yesterday, I imagined I was going to need it.

Phlegyas was waiting for me at the elevator with a warm smile, same as always.

"Good morning, my queen. Going up?"

"Seventh floor," I confirmed. "And you don't need to call me your queen yet—or ever, for that matter."

"You'll be queen soon enough." He pushed the button for Might as the doors closed. A wry smile tugged on his lips. "Hopefully by the time coronation comes, you'll be able to sit comfortably on your throne."

"Oh, *ha ha*. Very funny." I rolled my eyes and bristled a little with annoyance, but even I had to admit it *was* kind of funny.

Just, at my expense.

"I heard that His Majesty was injured yesterday," Phlegyas said slowly, like he was choosing his words with care. "Were you hurt at all?"

"Just my heart. And my backside later, for disobeying Luke—which I'm sure you've heard of."

Phlegyas's smile twitched. "It may have been suggested to me, yes. Your heart, though—you didn't take iron to it, did you?"

"I imagine if I had, I wouldn't be standing here in workout gear right now." No—I'd be dead in Los Angeles, waiting to be reincarnated while Luke tore the world apart as retribution. "It was just scary to see Luke wounded like that. I thought I'd lost him."

"Loss is a terrible thing." Phlegyas clasped his hands over his lap and bowed his head as his smile faded. "I'm sorry you had to feel that, my queen."

"You've lost someone too, though. Haven't you? Your daughter?" I'd been a little out of it when Phlegyas had mentioned it to Luke on the night of the dinner with the Fallen, but I'd definitely heard something of that sort. I'd been wanting to ask Phlegyas about it ever since but hadn't found the time yet.

"Her soul is in Heaven." Phlegyas nodded slightly. When he blinked, I saw a single tear glistening in the corner of his eye. "A beautiful place, or so I hear. Unfortunately, I wasn't offered admission."

"That's terrible." I put my hand on Phlegyas's elbow in a way I hoped was at least a little comforting. "I'm so sorry. If I had a child...I think I'd do the same thing. No parent deserves to be separated from their child like that."

"No," Phlegyas agreed. "No, they don't."

We both went silent as the elevator took us up to the seventh floor. But as the doors opened and I started to pull my hand away from Phlegyas's elbow, he stopped me.

"My queen..."

"Yes, Phlegyas?" I didn't like this *my queen* nonsense, but I guessed I needed to start to get used to it.

"Do you want children, my queen?"

I smirked. "You've either been talking to Luke or my mother, if you're asking me that." I slipped my hand away from his elbow and patted my shoulder, where my birth control implant was set beneath my skin. "But what I want doesn't matter for right now, anyway. This keeps me from getting pregnant."

"That's...very sad." Phlegyas reached for my arm. He hesitated for a moment, then gave it a squeeze. A strange, comforting warmth passed

from his hand into my bicep through the fabric of his white glove and my sleeve.

Just as warm as his smile was when he drew his hand away again.

“You will know the joy of motherhood someday,” he assured me. “Someday soon.”

I laughed. “I wouldn’t bank on it, Phlegyas—but thanks.”

Luke came to meet me at the elevator just as I exited it.

“You took your time, sleepy girl.” He slung an arm around my shoulder and tugged me towards him. His lips pressed against my temple sweetly. “What kept you? Not Phlegyas, I hope.”

“My aching ass, actually. Phlegyas... I feel sorry for him,” I said with a shrug as Luke guided me down the hall. “He was talking about his daughter...”

“Mm.” Luke drew his lips into a hard, line. “An old story—and a sad one.”

“What happened? He said she went to Heaven, and he wasn’t allowed in.” Just thinking about it made my heart pang.

I’d meant what I told Phlegyas back in the elevator.

I may not have known anything about being a parent—or if I even wanted to become one at all. But being separated from your own child for the rest of eternity based on a cruel technicality seemed like a painful burden to bear.

“Phlegyas’s daughter was killed by a Greek god. A vengeful one.”

“Great,” I groaned. I knew Greek mythology pretty well, just like every other living person in North America. They were *all* vengeful in their own ways—and this confirmed that those myths were probably all true, too. “I’d kind of hoped that you and Don were kidding about the other gods existing. Should I be worried about them, too?”

Given the way Zeb and Mammon had gotten their horny all over me at dinner, I wasn’t exactly thrilled about the prospect of running into Zeus.

“They won’t bother us,” Luke assured me. “Very few hold belief in them anymore. I imagine the Olympians are still out in the world somewhere, fucking and meddling and fighting same as always—but their stories are all that are keeping them alive at all. No belief, no power.”

“It’s a good thing so many people believe in the Devil, then,” I teased.

“And it’s an even better one that the Devil believes so completely in his wife.”

I blushed a little at Luke's words. I could feel his power tickling in my palms. It always felt stronger when I was by his side.

Maybe that was just where I belonged.

I supposed today, we'd probably find out exactly how far Luke's belief in me could really go.

A wave of nerves hit me as we reached the end of the hall. There was a huge, metal door there with a slot in it level with Luke's eyes.

It seemed...foreboding.

So far, everything about the Inferno had been luxury. But Might, the battle arena that I'd only heard about in passing as of yet, had a different vibe to it.

The atmosphere was grittier here. It reminded me of *Fight Club*. *On the Waterfront*. Darker and more intimidating than any other place I'd been here.

Which was exactly what I'd need to be if I planned on helping Luke defend against the angels' plans when they manifested again.

Luke rapped twice on the door. The sound clanged, echoing and metallic.

The slot slid open in return. I saw a flash of beast-like snout jut through it. A gold nose ring hung from a set of nostrils that snorted at us in annoyance.

"Code word?" the beast behind the door snarled.

"*Violenza*," Luke replied in perfectly accented Italian. *Violence*.

A snort of approval followed, and the slot slammed shut.

A moment later, the door opened.

I blinked in surprise at what I saw waiting for us behind it.

The thing that had opened the door for us was so, so much more than just a beast.

He was shirtless and huge, a head taller than even Luke. His bulging muscles were dark brown and oiled to gleam in the arena's dim golden glow. His horns were curved like a bull's, but two monstrous tusks poked up from his lower lip and over his upper one. Not bull-like at all.

There was only one thing this big, hulking creature could possibly be.

"*L'infamia di Creti*," Luke shook hands with the minotaur's hoof in greeting. *The infamy of Crete*. "It's good to see you again, brother."

"If you were my brother, adversary, my mother wouldn't have had to fuck a—" The minotaur chuckled as he turned to me. "Ah. Apologies, lady.

You'll have to forgive the blue humor. We're not used to your sort down here in the pits."

"Women?" I arched an eyebrow. "I hear you deal in beatings and blood here. Women know blood better than men do, I imagine."

The minotaur stared me down for a moment like he was puzzling out what I'd just said.

It took a few seconds, but when the realization finally caught in his eyes, he threw his head back and roared with laughter.

"He means pretty women who look like they've never thrown a punch before," Luke explained as the minotaur clutched at his stomach and continued to laugh.

"Remind me to tell you about the time I broke Jenny Jameson's nose for making fun of the special ed kids back in middle school sometime, then." I curled my hands into fists. "I know how to throw a punch."

"Excellent!" The minotaur slapped me on the back hard enough to knock all the air from my lungs. "Come inside then, come inside. All sorts of violent delights await you within."

I gave Luke a glance of uncertainty as we entered Might.

His good friend, Will, had written a thing or two about violent delights. They always led to violent ends.

The minotaur—I hadn't caught his name—didn't follow us into the arena, but there was plenty more for me to gawk at anyway.

Luke's ass in those sweatpants of his being only one among many.

The whole place was laid out like a colosseum, with tiered seating rising up around the edges and three fighting rings in the center of the room. When we passed the first ring, I spotted a centaur armed with bow and arrow trying to shoot down a winged woman with long, sharp talons as she swooped around him. On the edge of the ring, stout, horned demons in Versace suits cheered, booed and placed bets.

The next ring had a familiar face in it—or, three familiar faces, actually. Legion and two of her duplicates were battling a nude, unhinged-looking man who bore a striking resemblance to Brad Pitt in *Troy*.

"Come on, Achilles," one of the Legions teased as she perched on the ropes of the ring. "Don't tell me you need to go put on your stilettos just to make it a fair fight."

"Dammit, woman!" Achilles roared, lunging towards her with his fist raised. "I've told you before, that's not what having an Achilles heel

means!”

I was eager to see how this fight played out, but Luke guided me away from the second ring before I could see whether Achilles’ swing had hit or not.

“This is us,” Luke said as he brought me to the third ring. This one was empty. A raised, circular platform with springy ropes wrapped around it at waist and knee height.

“Who am I fighting, then?” I hopped up on the platform and ducked to get beneath the lower rope. “You?”

Luke smirked. “Not quite. I’ll be coaching you from the sidelines.” He waved a hand toward the shadows near the seating behind him. A tall, kilted man emerged from them, grinning ear to ear.

“Think ye can take me, Lass?” asked Lock, arms spread wide.

I looked him up and down, then nodded with a confidence I wasn’t sure I actually felt. “I think I can whoop your drunken Scottish ass, Lock.”

Lock snickered. “I’d tell ye the same in return, but from the sounds of things, Dawnstar already did that for me last night.”

I clenched my jaw and flushed as I looked to Luke. I could tell he was trying not to smirk, but the shrug he gave me was almost just as bad.

“No funny business,” I warned Lock as he hopped up into the ring with me. “You might be a fallen angel, but I’m still human.”

“Aye, well, if yer as bonny a fighter as your friend Joan, I don’t reckon there’ll be anything funny about this for either of us.” Lock cracked his knuckles, still grinning. His eye wasn’t swollen anymore, but I imagined he still remembered how it’d felt to get kicked in the face by Joan’s boot. “Ready?”

I took a deep breath.

I wasn’t sure that it was possible for me to be as good of a fighter as Joan. She’d always given me the impression that she’d been born throwing punches.

But I’d have to do my best.

“Let’s do this.” I waved Lock forward. “Hit me with your best shot.”

As it turned out, Lock was a kind sparring partner. He overexaggerated all of his movements until I got used to tracking and reacting to them. When I let my guard down, he didn’t hit me, or even slap me.

But after just half an hour of practicing, my nose and ears were burning as pink as my ass had been last night. Every time Lock saw an

opportunity, he was sure to give me a quick, hard flick so I knew that he could have taken me down if he'd wanted to.

"Let's see your fire now, love," Luke called from the edge of the ring once I'd gotten the basics of moving in response to Lock down. "Hit him with your flames—and make him burn."

"Won't that hurt you?" I asked Lock, still a little uneasy about the prospect of actually unleashing my flames at him.

"Aye, I s'pose it will, at that." Lock gave me a wink as he raised his fists in front of his face, assuming a boxer's stance. "But if ye mind the burning, ye'd probably best not be in Hell in the first place."

We worked for hours on everything from conjuring the flames to aiming them properly. At first, it felt a little pointless. I just couldn't quite manage to make them burn big enough to launch at Lock.

But a few flicks to the nose and jokes about the spanking I'd endured last night later, and I felt myself getting angry enough that I didn't mind burning him so much.

Anger was the key to these powers, I was starting to realize. Rage made my fire burn hotter, brighter, and more gigantic.

As we hit the two-hour mark, I finished Lock off with wall of flame so huge and hot, it knocked him on his ass and singed the stubble from his chin to boot.

"Verra good, lass." Lock laughed and rubbed his jawline as he picked himself up again. "Take a man's beard and ye've taken his pride right along with it. It's a fair way to stun the fight right out of a man, ye ken."

"You boys do seem to love your facial hair." I smirked as I remembered Luke's threat to grow a beard. "I think I'm good on fire now. What's next?"

"You're not tired, love?" Luke arched a dark eyebrow and offered me a bottle of water from the edge of the ring. "I expected you to wear out an entire hour ago."

"Oh, I'm exhausted," I admitted casually. My muscles ached bad enough, the pain in my ass was barely a memory at this point. My body was beaded with sweat. Even my braid was starting to get damp with it. "But we've already started. We might as well keep going."

"You shouldn't push yourself so hard," Luke warned me. "All that fire you've spent, you'll burn out if you're not careful."

I waved his words away as I accepted the bottle of water. “This isn’t about being careful. It’s about being prepared. I can keep going. Promise. If I feel like I’m reaching my limits, I’ll let you know. We’ll stop then.”

“All right,” Luke said—but he didn’t seem happy about it. “Wait there, then.”

I took a sip of the water as Luke turned toward the seats on the edge of the arena again. I was curious about what he would bring me to work with next—a bow and arrow? A battle axe? But as soon as the water hit my tongue, a sip turned into a greedy chug.

It was ice cold and crisp. My body was desperate for every last drop.

By the time Luke returned, hands hidden behind his back, I’d drained the bottle completely.

“Good girl.” Luke took the bottle from me with one hand, then pulled out the object he’d been hiding with the other. “Now tell me...what do you think of this?”

Luke was holding a long, heavy-looking broadsword. It was made entirely of black metal, with intricate swirls shaped into its hilt.

The thing was so huge, I didn’t know how I was possibly going to be able to lift it in my current state, let alone swing it.

“I’ve never used a sword before,” I told him as I eyed the blade.

He might as well have brought me a heavy machine gun. Or a death ray.

“You’ve used this one,” Luke promised. “Though I suppose you don’t remember it. We talked about *Prometheus Bound* yesterday morning, you’ll recall.”

“We did...” I had no idea how that tied into the gigantic sword Luke was holding right now, though.

“First fire. The fire I stole to bring you warmth on a dark, cold Earth.” Luke turned the sword around in his hand and offered me the hilt. “This is its source. The burning blade. Thieved from the gates of Eden itself.”

“It catches fire?” I asked, running my fingers over the hilt experimentally. The swirls in the metal were completely mesmerizing. Up close like this, they even *looked* like flames.

“Take it in your hand and think of destruction,” Luke said with a small nod. “It’ll ignite for you at will.”

I bit my lip as I curled my fingers beneath the hilt. It was far too heavy for me to wield with just one hand. I nearly dropped it at first.

But as soon as I wrapped my other fist around it and closed my eyes, all of Luke's instructions went right out the window.

Smoke burned in my nose and choked my lungs. The sounds of men dying all around me filled my ears.

I opened my eyes, frantically searching for Luke's reassuring gaze at the edge of the ring—

But I wasn't in the ring anymore.

I was on a battlefield.

EVIE***SOMEWHERE IN A MEMORY...******Philomelium, 1097***

“**F**lorine!” My long, dark braids whipped around fast enough to make the air crack as I turned my head to the sound of Sweyn’s voice. His pale blue eyes were full of fire. His dark hair was matted red with other men’s blood. A glint caught my eyes as he raised his battle axe. “Duck!”

I bent down and pressed my cheek against my horse’s neck. I could feel its pulse thrumming beneath my ear as I twined my fingers in its pale silver mane.

The air whistled through its teeth above me. Sweyn’s axe soared just over my me, twirling as my horse’s hooves pounded the dirt. Up ahead, another rider emerged from the rocky passage ahead of me.

Sweyn’s axe met the rider in the chest before he even had a chance to raise his bow.

My heart was thundering, but beneath it, something warm and full of beauty swelled.

My husband. My love.

He'd been right.

This had been meant to be an ambush—but now, thanks to Sweyn's quick thinking, we'd caught them off guard.

I raised my sword as ten other archers emerged from the rocks. I only had to tighten my grip on it and think of my rage to set my blade alight. The scent of hot iron, tangy and metallic, filled my nose.

Before the next archer was able to nock his arrow, I swiped down at him and lopped off his head.

Justice.

Sweyn had told me that these men had been touched by angels. I didn't believe that for a moment, though.

The angels were the ones that watched over us. No matter how many times Sweyn told me he was the devil himself, I knew better.

Sweyn was kind. Valiant. Handsome. A man of God if I'd ever known one.

If he was the devil, then when I'd knelt to help him into his boots that morning, I would have noticed cloven feet.

When we'd made love in our tent last night, I imagined I would have found his tail as well.

No. Sweyn was no Lucifer, and I was no Lilith. No matter what silly tales my husband spun.

We were Sweyn the Crusader and Florine of Burgundy. Our war was a holy one. Ordained by Pope Alexander. Blessed by the Lord.

I raised my sword again at my new target, another rider. His eyes were vacant as he approached, already white with surrender. His riding posture was poor.

I'd learned to ride nearly as soon as I could walk. First, on ponies, or on stallions with my father's arms around me, gripping the reins. My horse was an extension of my body. The flaming sword that Sweyn had given me—the one he claimed was from the gates of Eden itself—was an extension of my arm.

My opponent had the look of a man who'd never ridden a horse before in his life.

A pity that he would never have a chance to learn.

I swung my sword down, a curtain of flames trailing behind it—but before I could make contact, my horse reared up sharply without warning.

No!

My body was launched sideways. I untangled my fingers from the horse's mane before my grip yanked my arm from its socket. The sword, I tossed aside before I fell.

I knew that God would protect me today, but it was silly not to help Him by doing what I could to protect myself.

My shoulder hit the ground first. I used the momentum to roll to my feet. The sword was back in my hand in an instant.

If by the Almighty's will I lost my life today, I wasn't going to die unarmed in the dirt.

"Are ye hurt, lass?" Lachlan, Sweyn's swordsman from the Scottish Highlands, clapped me on the back as I caught my breath.

"I'll live." I nodded, then turned to the battle that had broken out around us.

The ambush had turned into a slaughter. I spotted Sweyn's banner woman, the one he called Legion, cutting down the enemy everywhere I turned. The men that Lachlan had brought with him, Malcolm and Donal, fought fiercely. Bodies piled up wherever their axes swung.

But as I looked at the gap between the rocks, I knew that it wasn't enough.

More enemies flooded through the chasm. They slid down its slopes and charged through the space between the rocks, horses snorting, bows and blades drawn.

More than we could manage.

More than I had hope we could vanquish, even with our full strength.

Perhaps Sweyn was right after all.

Perhaps God *wasn't* on our side.

"Behind you, my love." Sweyn rushed to my side as the enemy encircled us. He cupped my jaw in his hand and stole a greedy kiss. A quick one—we didn't have much time for anything else. "Have faith."

"Don't I always," I shot back at him.

"Too much, maybe." Sweyn shifted his axe between his hands as he pressed his back against mine. "But that's all we have now."

We fought back to back as the others fell. I watch the one Sweyn called Legion die a dozen different times in a dozen different ways, as though she was capable of being in more than one place at a time. Lachlan, Malcolm and Donal all took wounds to the chests and necks. They dropped to their knees, trying frantically to pull the metal arrows from their skin.

Sweyn's men, the ones he had brought with him from Denmark, died horrible deaths all around us. My heart ached for them as Sweyn and I fought on.

They would go to Heaven, at least. It was some consolation.

And if I died here in Philomelium today, set upon by cowardly brutes with white eyes like demons, so would I. I knew it as well as I knew the scent of wine in oaken barrels, the incense of the cathedral where Sweyn and I had been married, the smell of Sweyn himself on me when we awoke together in our tent. Dark, masculine, and all mine.

If we died today, we would live again in the embrace of God.

I didn't want to die, though.

I wanted my husband—my love—to die even less.

"Fuck." Sweyn spat the curse as the enemy closed in. We were surrounded completely now. Our allies all lay in the dirt, either dead or dying. "Florine, do you remember our vows?"

"I could never forget them." I hadn't loved Sweyn when we first married, but I'd wanted to. With every inch of my soul, I'd wanted to give him my heart in that moment.

And I had.

I did.

He'd taken me to his castle. He'd called it Hell, but I knew better. Nine levels of pleasure had been waiting for me inside.

He'd been terrible at first, yes. Rough. Demanding. Impatient. Sinful, even. On the first night, when he tried to share my bed, I ran from him, thinking him a brute.

But he had captured me. Brought me back to him.

He'd made me see what a truly honorable man he could be in his kindnesses, in the way he moaned my name when he was inside me and the way he fought for me even when I'd long since given up.

I loved him now, more than I'd ever loved anything in all my life.

Forgetting our vows wasn't possible.

Love, honor, and obey.

I whispered them to myself every time I woke up in his arms and saw him smiling in his sleep, and I thanked the good Lord for giving him to me.

I belonged to him. I would die for him.

"Then run," he told me. "I'll hold them back."

My mouth fell open. The flames of my sword extinguished.

Run? Why? And to where?

We were surrounded. We were already beaten.

I was already prepared to die by his side, so we might enter the Kingdom of Heaven hand in hand, man and wife for all of eternity.

But though I tried to hold my ground, I found I could not. I had vowed to Sweyn that I would obey him. I'd vowed it before God Himself.

I couldn't help myself but obey him now.

My feet started running as soon as I spotted a gap in the enemy's ranks.

But my heart—I left that there with him.

The first arrow that pierced my skin didn't stop me. Nor did the second, or the third. Sweyn fought ferociously where I had left him, trying to draw off as much of the enemy as possible, and I knew that it would be him that would die for me today.

I didn't want to leave him, but I couldn't help but follow the order he'd given me. I had a duty to my husband. He'd told me to run, and I had no choice but to obey.

A fourth arrow caught me in the knee. Pain seared through my leg as I fell to the ground. I hit hard, stirring up a cloud of dust upon impact.

I rolled over to try and pull the arrow out, but its shaft had snapped off when I hit the ground. What was left was too slick with my blood to get a grip on.

The next arrow caught me in the back. I felt my lung collapse as it was punctured. When I took a breath, I sucked air like a broken bellows that refused to expand.

Sweyn had ordered me to run, but I couldn't run anymore.

It was the moment that I knew I'd die here—and if I couldn't run, then at least I wanted to see Sweyn's face once more before the angels carried me to Paradise.

I turned and clawed at the dirt, crawling my way back to him. My body was weak, but my soul was strong.

When he saw me reach for him, tears in my eyes, he kicked aside the man he'd been fighting and threw his axe away.

"Sweyn! No!" I cried out his name, begging him not to stop fighting, but his assailants backed away without further attacks.

For a moment, I wondered if it wasn't me who they'd been after this entire time. Just me. Only me.

Somehow, that felt worse.

"Darling. Darling...*no*." Sweyn's voice was hoarse as he dropped to his knees before me.

There was heartache in his eyes. I recognized it immediately.

Through all the pain, I felt it too.

I grabbed his leg guards and did my best to pull myself onto his lap, but I didn't have the strength.

"Don't strain yourself, my love." Sweyn took hold of my shoulder guards and brought me into his arms like I weighed nothing. "Come here. Let me hold you. Let me hold you, my darling love."

He pressed my cheek to the warm metal of his breast plate. His hands smoothed down the seafoam green dress beneath my own armor, checking each wound.

"I can fix this," he whispered. "I can heal you."

"You are no healer, my husband." I coughed and found blood on my tongue. "You heal me enough with the light of your love."

"Not enough," he snarled. His fingers pulled at each of the arrows as he attempted to draw them each from my skin. "If you don't live, it won't have been enough."

But as Sweyn tugged out the arrow that was stuck between my ribs, one of our assailants simply let loose another that sank into its place.

Seven arrows. Seven deadly sins.

I didn't even feel this one.

I knew then that our attackers would not let me live, and so did he.

"Husband." I forced my lips into a smile as I looked up at him, though I knew my lips were tinged red with my blood. "Do not mourn for me. I will see you again."

"You will, love," he agreed. "I know you will—but I don't want to wait."

"In Heaven, darling." I closed my eyes and imagined it. A place of sinless, perfect bliss where he and I could spend the rest of eternity together, basking in the warmth of our Lord's love. "It will be worth the wait."

He opened his mouth and looked as though he wanted to argue with me but seemed to change his mind before the words left his lips.

“You are always worth the wait, my beauty.” He smoothed his thumb across my mouth, wiping away the blood. “But I want you here. Here with me, now.”

“We had our time together here on Earth.” My voice was faint now. Words came slow and clumsy from my tongue. “Every moment of it was a blessing.”

“Damn you, woman.” He clenched his eyes shut. Tears welled up from between his long, dark lashes. “Fight for me. Please. Don’t give up. Don’t leave me.”

It was difficult, but I raised my hand to his cheek. A final caress.

I wanted to fight, but there was no more fight left in me. My body was failing. I could feel the world slipping away more and more every time I breathed.

“I will see you again,” I promised. A deep shadow passed over me. I glanced up to see a knight in glossy black armor, more beautifully wrought than any other I’d ever laid eyes on. “I will, my love. In Heaven, I will.”

“Yes,” he croaked. There was something in his eyes that told me he didn’t believe me—but if there was anyone ever worthy of Paradise, I knew it was him. “In Heaven.”

The black knight held out a hand to me, visor gleaming in the sun. It had been so difficult to touch Sweyn’s face just a moment ago, but when I reached for the knight’s glove, it was effortless.

“I love you,” I told my husband as the black knight lifted me from the ground and took me into his arms. “With all my heart.”

Sweyn reached for my hand as the black knight carried me away. He clung to my fingertips until they slipped from his grip.

“With all my heart,” he echoed. “With all my fucking heart.”

He slumped forward, face buried in his hands as I was carried off.

It was my only regret—that I couldn’t see his face one last time before the Angel of Death whisked me away.

EVIE

The real world came back to me in a slow, melting blend of what had been and what truly was.

Just like waking up from a bad, bad dream.

I was on the floor of the ring. Luke's arms were wrapped around me, strong and warm. He held my face to his chest as he stroked my hair and whispered soothing words to me.

Just like he always did when a memory hit particularly hard.

"That's it, love. Come on back to me, now." His accent, that smooth rumble like thunder, was a comfort.

The feeling of his lips against mine was an even better one.

I leaned into the kiss and breathed in Luke's scent until I felt my heart stop racing.

I needed it.

The first death I'd felt had been horrible.

This one had been even worse.

I needed *him*.

"Are ye all right, lass?" Lock stood near us, hands on his knees as he crouched down to our level. The sword I'd been holding when the memory hit lay behind him, a few feet away.

There was concern for me in Lock's eyes.

I wasn't sure if that made me feel cared about, or just made me even more embarrassed.

I didn't like being so weak like this. It was humiliating that the last two times Lock had seen me, he'd watched me pass out. But it was nice to know that Lock wasn't going to spend *all* his time laughing about the spanking I'd received, at least.

Probably, it was a little bit of both.

"My stomach's in knots," I admitted. There was no point in lying. I'd promised Luke that I'd be honest about when I'd reached my limit for the day, and I was definitely at that point now. "And I can still feel the places where all seven of those arrows were sticking out of my body."

Luke moved his thumb to my shoulder and smoothed his pad over the aching circle of skin there.

"Florine," he guessed. "You remembered your death in Philomelium then. The Crusades?"

"Must have been." I forced a tight smile through pain, even though I couldn't quite make it meet my eyes. "It was kind of a shame. I really liked my dress."

"The seafoam." Luke's eyes glimmered as he returned my smile, but there was sadness in the pale blue. "I remember it well. My warrior princess. Warrior bride."

"I called you Sweyn." The word rhymed with *slain*, which seemed like a messy bit of foreshadowing in hindsight. "I don't think I even realized you were...you."

"Satan incarnate?" Luke laughed. "You were much more headstrong that time round, if you can believe that's even possible. Full of fight and faith and conviction. I tried to explain it all to you, but..." He shrugged. "Sometimes, you don't want to believe. I'm surprised I convinced your father to give me your hand in marriage at all."

I let out a huff of air that felt almost like a laugh. "Anything for the good of the kingdom, I guess."

I pursed my lips as I relished the way Luke was still smoothing my hair down over the back of my head. It felt good, but there were a few things still bothering me about the memory I'd just experienced.

Like how much I'd loved Luke. Real love. Not this careful thing that I was still half-terrified to admit right now. Actual, heart, body and mind-bending adoration.

God. It had felt like it tore my soul in two to know that I'd reach Heaven before him. Like I would have given my entire life for him

anyway.

Like I was happy to die as long as he lived on.

I'd never felt anything more profound in all my life. And even now that the memory had faded, as I stared up into his eyes, I could feel it still. In my ribs and my spine and my throat.

"Something wrong, love?" Luke asked.

Yes, I wanted to say, *I'm afraid I might actually love you this time around, too.*

But I wasn't ready to talk through *that* particular feeling with Luke. Not quite yet. Not aloud—and certainly not while Lock was looking on.

"How many times, Luke?" That was the other thing that bothered me. Luke and I had been playing out this cycle since the beginning of time itself. If I was having flashbacks to every time I'd died now...

They could be infinite.

I might not ever have another waking moment of peace, now that I knew that a memory like the one I'd just experienced could be triggered at the slightest suggestion, touch, sound or smell.

And that was assuming that these memories didn't start seeping into my dreams as well.

Luke frowned. "Too many, love. Far too many."

"Ye rarely go down wi'out a fight, though." Lock moved to the sword and picked it up, weighing it in his hand. "I ken why Luke keeps falling for ye. Not a single demon in all of Hell can resist a lass who knows her way around a sword."

"Is that so?" Joan's voice called out from beyond the ring. She approached us, wearing a pair of workout shorts and an oversized sweatshirt. Her dark bob was messy, and her forehead glistened with sweat, like she'd just finished warming up. "Because I distinctly remember you resisting me quite effectively yesterday."

"Did I, now?" Lock smiled broadly as soon as his gaze fell on Joan. "Can't seem tae recall."

Joan pushed the sleeve of her sweatshirt up to her elbow, revealing a smattering of bruises in every color across her skin. "And yet, I can't seem to forget."

I found myself smiling a little as I watched the way they looked at each other. It eased the pain of the memory away, if only for a little while.

Joan had been just short of stunned when she first met Lock. Now, the two of them seemed to be far more comfortable around each other. Thick as thieves.

I wondered if they weren't getting along outside of the fighting ring too. From the way Lock brightened just from her presence, it seemed entirely possible.

If it was true, I was happy for them. Their arguments would be the stuff of legends, knowing Joan—but then again, so would their make-up sex.

"You okay, Eves?" Joan finally tore her eyes away from Lock for long enough to notice Luke and me on the floor of the ring. "You look beat."

"I think I might've been." I laughed a little as Luke helped me to my feet. "We've been training. I think Lock might be a little out of my league."

"Maybe he's just part of different one." Joan hopped up into the ring and jogged over to give me a hug. "Sorry, I'm sweaty. Legion let me tag in with Achilles before I came over. Can you believe this place?"

"It seems perfect for you." I gave her a tight squeeze, not minding the sweat. I was pretty soaked in my own anyway. "You want to take my place whooping Lock's ass for me now? I think I might be spent for the day."

"Finally, she admits it." Luke put his arm around my shoulder and drew me to his side. "We should go grab a drink. It might help."

"Water, maybe." As nice as it would have been to drink away my memories right now, I hated to think I might trigger another. I suspected if there'd ever been a Viking version of me, she would have dedicated herself to finding a way to drink Luke under the table. "But I think a shower would be nicer, honestly. And food. I burned through that croissant hours ago."

"Feel better, Eves. I'm rooting for you." Joan gave me a smile of confidence before her eyes turned to the sword in Lock's hands. "Okay, you've *gotta* let me give that a swing."

"And lose my head for your efforts?" Lock lifted up the sword as Joan reached for it, holding it just out of her reach. "Not a chance, lass."

"With your temper, you'll lose your head long before I decapitate you," Joan argued. "C'mon. It'll be *fun*."

As Joan began to chase Lock around the ring, Luke helped me back down onto solid ground again.

“A shower is a good idea,” he told me. “And food is a better one. I wonder, though...”

“What do you wonder, Mr. Dawnstar?” I nestled my body a little closer to his. Our feet fell into step with each other’s without even trying to.

“Would you be interested in some company, Mrs. Dawnstar?”

“In the shower, or eating lunch?”

Luke tapped his fingers against the small of my back thoughtfully. “Surely you know by now I mean both.”

I closed my eyes as we walked, feeling out my body. Luke was more than capable of guiding me away from any dangers we might run into.

For as long as we were here in the Inferno, anyway.

As we walked, I realized how badly my muscles ached. They burned even without the added pain in the places where the arrows had pierced my skin in that memory.

But apart from the stinging of phantom arrows, the real hurt I felt wasn’t all that bad. Not physically, at least. I’d worked hard today, and that made me proud.

I was learning to defend myself. Now that I’d felt myself die twice, I had no doubts about how important that was.

And knowing Luke, whatever he had planned for our shower would have my body feeling incredible again in no time at all.

My stomach was still a little queasy, sure, but eating lunch naked in bed with Luke would probably improve that, too.

All that left were the two problems that memory had presented me with.

Those, unfortunately, wouldn’t be so easy to solve.

I needed to figure out my feelings for Luke. The real ones. I’d put it off for the weeks since we’d said our vows, but now that I’d felt exactly how much love I could hold in my heart for him, I could feel the time left on my procrastination clock running out as well.

I knew I loved waking up in bed with him every morning. I loved the way he smiled in his sleep.

I loved fucking him. I loved the way he kissed me and the idle way he always found an excuse to touch my body, even when there wasn’t any real reason...

I loved all of that.

Sometimes, when he made me orgasm, I even loved him. I blurted it out like some kind of idiot, my brain completely turned to mush in orgasmic bliss.

And even though he knew that was just the orgasm talking...

He always told me that he loved me, too.

But did I feel the same way about him that I'd felt in that memory?

That was something I needed to sort out. The faster, the better.

Then, there was the other thing. The dying thing.

So much fucking dying.

Despite what I might have believed as Florine of Burgundy, in my current role as Evelyn Dawnstar, I knew that any angels who were watching over me were only doing it so they could look out for moments of weakness.

They'd been spying on me during my run yesterday. I was all but sure of it. They'd sent humans to attack us too, just like they had at Philomelium.

The ache from the spanking that Luke had given me might have been lost to the rest of my aches and pains, but his reasoning behind it was clearer to me now more than ever.

I'd died thousands of times at the hands of Heaven's agents.

I'd die again if I wasn't careful.

I might die anyway, even if I was.

And Florine had been wrong on another count, too.

I didn't get to go to Heaven when I died.

I didn't get to go to Hell, either.

If the angels killed me this time around, it would just start another reincarnation cycle. I'd be born again. Luke would find me again.

And I'd be murdered again.

And again.

And again.

Forever and ever, amen.

LUKE

“You know, I find myself impressed, Lucifer.” Belial swirled her wine around in her glass as she peered down into the fighting arena below. We were seated in the top box of Might, the one where only the Fallen and I ever viewed matches from.

“That’s rare.” I took a sip of my whiskey and placed it back down on the arm of my chair. It was comfortable enough—though I had to admit, it would have been better with Evie here on my lap instead of fighting with the beasts below. “You’d think that a woman of your tastes would have experienced too much of the world by now for that kind of thing.”

“She was so weak when I saw her in your arms that night at Indulgence. But now...” Belial tapped clapped one-handed against her wrist as Evie took down a centaur with her sword. “She really is something, isn’t she?”

“If you’re impressed by that, you should see her in bed,” I said with a smirk. She really was doing me proud today. Belial’s approval was proof.

“Is that an offer, Lucifer?” Belial arched a dark eyebrow suggestively.

“Not on your life.” Knowing Belial, getting my wife in bed would have been the perfect feather in her cap. As much as Belial enjoyed her three-ways and orgies, I wasn’t interested in sharing Evie with anyone—least of all Belial.

She pushed her lips out in a pout. “So cruel of you to get a girl’s hopes up like that, only to crush them so carelessly beneath your heel.”

I shrugged, unmoved. “They don’t call me the Devil for nothing, I suppose.”

Down in the ring, Evie raised her sword over her head victoriously. The seats at the arena were full tonight. She had a packed house of demons and the damned cheering her victory on in a hellish roar.

She’d fought beautifully. Every opponent that Moloch had thrown at her, she’d defeated with ease.

As she should have. In between her teaching, her thesis work, and romps in the bedroom with me, Evie had spent every spare moment training here in Might.

It was a good thing, too. Nearly every time we’d gone Above so she could attend to her work at the university, we’d been attacked. It almost felt as though the angels *knew* when she was going to be in Los Angeles.

Evie felt the same way. She’d told me so herself. Whenever she was at her most vulnerable, the human minions of the angels never failed to arrive. They came armed with blessed iron for me and everything from letter openers to kitchen knives for her.

We’d had a few close calls. Even one was one too many by my reckoning, but in the last week alone, Evie had nearly been bludgeoned to death with a cast iron skillet and narrowly escaped having a fucking *piano* dropped on her head.

Desperately, I wanted to forbid her from going Above until further notice. Doing so would surely save her life.

Unfortunately, it would also damn us both.

No. The treaty had to remain unbroken.

Evie had to retain her free will, or else we would all pay.

“I don’t see why you don’t just keep her chained up down here.” Zeb took a pull of his cigar and blew a smoke ring from a few seats away. He stared at me like he’d read my mind—or, more likely, he’d just been feeding on the frustration simmering off me like heat from a fire. “It would save us all an awful lot of headaches; you have to admit.”

“She’s a queen, Beelzebub.” I shook my head. “She doesn’t belong in chains.”

“She does if they’re for her own good.” Zeb stroked his chin thoughtfully. “Were she my wife—”

“She’s not.”

“Were she,” Zeb continued with a shrug, “I would simply convince her to enjoy the chains. You could make a little game of it. A collar would look most attractive on that slender neck of hers.”

“It would be like trying to cage a hurricane.” As if I hadn’t tried before. Any time I had tried to lock Evie up or tie her down, she always escaped in the end—and we’d both suffered from the consequences of that too many times to count.

“Maybe. But were she my wife—”

My jaw clenched hard enough to make my molars ache. “Choose your next words with care, Beelzebub. It would bring me great pleasure to watch you pick them off the carpet, along with most of your teeth.”

“You built the Inferno for her.” Zeb smirked and leaned back in his chair. “You created an entire paradise to amuse her, to pamper her, to entertain her—”

“And now, she lives here happily.” I’d been tired of this conversation since the moment it began. Now, I was growing exhausted.

Beelzebub tended to have that effect on people, I supposed.

“She lives here part-time, adversary. What could the human world possibly give her that you can’t provide here?”

“Her life, Zeb.” He spoke as though I didn’t know every angle of this argument. I’d played it out with every member of the Fallen, with each of my demons, with Evie—with myself—over a thousand lifetimes. I knew all of its twists and turns, and more importantly, I knew exactly how it ended. “Love is not some all-consuming thing, no matter what the poets pretend. She has her own ambitions. Her own life. If she didn’t, she wouldn’t be her. She wouldn’t be mine. To take that away from her would snuff out her spark forever.”

I’d broken Evie before. I’d pushed too far, denied her the Earthly things that brought her the most joy, and I’d suffered for that, too.

We both had.

I didn’t want her some broken, mewling thing.

I wanted her—*needed* her—passionate and fierce and *alive*.

Even if that meant burning myself clear through to prevent her death.

I’d break myself into pieces before I ever even dreamed of breaking her like that again.

“If you don’t snuff out her spark, the angels will.” Zeb’s voice was haughty and needling. Like this was some kind of joke to him.

Knowing Zeb, it probably was.

“Beelzebub,” I said, turning to him slowly.

His smirk widened into a sinister grin. “Yes, Your Majesty?”

“If you’re finding it too difficult to hold your tongue, do let me know.”

Casually, I drew my knife. I admired it as tilted the blade back and forth until it caught the light. “I’ll cut it out and put it in a nice Hermes handbag for you, if it will make it easier.”

“Oh, Mr. Dawnstar.” Evie’s voice cooed from behind me as she bent over the back of my chair and wrapped her arms around my neck. Her cheek was damp with sweat and pleasantly cool as she pressed it to mine. “I do love the way you make threats.”

“One of his better qualities, really.” Zeb studied his dark, sharp nails idly for a moment before he turned his smile on Evie. “You fought beautifully, by the way. For a moment there, it was easy to forget you were a human at all.”

“Thank you,” Evie said slowly. Her eyes narrowed in suspicion. “I think.”

I sighed as she pressed a kiss to my cheek. She had every right to be suspicious of Zeb.

Of all the Fallen, he was the one I trusted the least right now.

“You’re more powerful than I would have guessed, little Lilith.” Belial turned to Evie with a sultry smile. She stretched out her hand, palm down, toward Evie with a wide, cooing yawn. “I don’t think we had a chance to meet properly the other night in Indulgence. You may call me Belial. Bell, if you’d prefer.”

“Evie.” Evie took Belial’s hand and turned it over so she could shake it properly. “It’s nice to meet you.”

“Nice. Oh, that’s just *precious*,” Belial purred. “Are you sure you’re not willing to share her, Lucifer? She would make such an excellent addition to my harem.”

“Or to my dungeons,” Beelzebub added. “If we’re all throwing our hats in the ring.”

I wanted to knock the air out of both their lungs then and there—but before I could, Evie draped herself across my lap and gave them each a polite smile.

“I’m a taken woman, I’m afraid.” She flashed her ring at both of them, then turned to me. “I missed you, Luke. Did you watch me fight too?”

Slowly, I smiled and drew her chin down so I could relish a kiss from her gorgeous lips. “I couldn’t take my eyes off you.”

“How could anyone?” Mammon hunched into the top box, grinning like mad as he thumbed a fist full of hundred-dollar bills. “You’ve earned me a great deal of money today, *bella*. Betting on you—so swift, so strong—it was a very lucrative endeavor indeed.”

I watched with amusement as Evie’s eyelashes flickered. She held her hand out to Mammon expectantly.

“Where’s my cut, then?”

Mammon stopped abruptly and looked at her as though she’d just called him a Catholic.

Bell snorted. Even Zeb looked amused.

I laughed openly at the gall of her. Asking Mammon for money was like trying to squeeze water from a stone.

But after a moment, Mammon laughed as well.

“Oh, you are a crafty one indeed, *stellina*.” He chuckled as he counted out five bills from his stack and placed them in her hand. “For your courage. Most who ask me for money do not live to tell the tale.”

“It’s a good thing you have a vested interest in keeping me alive, then.” Evie wrapped an arm around my neck as she tucked the money in the pocket of my jacket. “I assume you’ve already placed your bets on my next fight.”

For a few long moments, I said nothing. I could only stare at her in awe.

This wasn’t the same Evie that I’d found in Limbo the night we met, desperately checking her phone in the hopes that her drunken, cheating fiancé might show her a shred of love or attention.

She was changing. Right before my eyes, she was becoming so much more of herself than I’d ever seen her—in this lifetime, or any other.

This was the woman I’d chosen. The woman I’d claimed.

My Lilith. My Evie.

My bride.

Every moment she breathed, she did me proud.

Lock and Mulciber were the last to enter the top box for this meeting. Lock’s brow was furrowed with annoyance as he shoved the shorter man inside.

“Caught the wee bastard up on the rooftop trying to add a tenth floor,” Lock grumbled. “Something about an entire story of escalators that led to nowhere. Complete shite.”

“I got bored,” Mulciber complained. As his gaze focused on Evie, his eyes lit up. “But if we could begin making plans for the nursery, perhaps—”

“Later.” I raised my hand and twirled my finger in the air. Evie giggled and clung to me as the armchair beneath us spun around. The other chairs moved into place to form a circle where we could all look at each other comfortably while we spoke. “Right now, we need to talk about the coronation. When we’re done, you all can scheme as much as you like.”

But as the other Fallen took their seats, a small sensation of discontent flickered through my chest.

We *did* need to make plans for Evie’s coronation. It was unavoidable, and if we did it without the Fallen’s approval, there would be no end to the petty dramatics that would follow.

There were few things the Fallen hated more than feeling left out of my best-laid plans.

But as I looked at each of them, I couldn’t help but wonder...

Someone was leaking information to the angels about Evie’s comings and goings from Hell. This latest slew of attacks all but confirmed it for me.

Could it be one of them?

Belial was too lazy for such espionage. Lock, too loyal. There wasn’t enough money in it to interest Mammon, and all Mulciber wanted to do was finish building the palace he’d started on millennia ago.

Which left Zeb.

Would he sell Evie out to Heaven like that?

Maybe.

For all his talk of keeping Evie in chains for her safety, if he thought there was something to be gained from giving her up to the angels, I didn’t think he would even hesitate.

If Zeb was left out of the planning of this event, he would almost certainly lash out in any way he could.

And if he was the traitor in our midst, allowing him to know our plans would only give the angels that much more of an advantage.

It was a catch-22 so insidious, it made me wish I'd never developed the concept in the first place.

"Let's talk coronation, then." Zeb clenched his cigar between his teeth and clapped his hands together. "Do we have a date yet? A location?"

"Spring break," Evie said before I could stop her. "I'll have some time off school, and it's better than waiting for summer."

"Have we considered Hawaii for the location?" Belial smiled at Evie over her wine glass. "Bikinis on the beach, some fire twirlers, hula dancers..."

"I might like Hawaii," Evie admitted. "But I think doing it somewhere closer to home would be more convenient."

"Anywhere but Paris," I said firmly.

The last thing I wanted was for Evie to relive her death on Bastille Day a second time around.

"I guess we need to keep thinking about it." Evie laughed tiredly. "I'm sorry. I should have come more prepared. There's just been a lot going on lately."

She was still glowing from her fight and glimmering with sweat. But beneath the way she shimmered, I could tell she was worn out, too.

Best make this fast, then.

"We'll table the location discussion, then." I turned to Zeb. "Surveillance is your job. What news do you have for us on Heaven's movements?"

"They've focused their efforts on Los Angeles for the moment. Seeing as Evie is most vulnerable when she's there alone, it only makes sense." Slowly, a smile spread across his lips. A faint buzzing filled the room in its wake. "Now, if a member of the Fallen were to watch out for Evie while she's on campus—nothing obvious, of course, but a fly on the wall, perhaps—"

"No," I said firmly. Giving Beelzebub the opportunity to surveil Evie at will would be like giving a thief the keys to your castle. Ill-advised on every count. "I have Legion, Abaddon and Malacoda on watch already. While your services are appreciated, Beelzebub, they are not required." Thank fuck. "Focus on the angels. I want to know where they plan to strike next before they even know it themselves."

"As you wish," Zeb said with an eye roll. "I'll keep my eyes on the sky and my ears to the ground."

“Good.” I turned to Mammon next. “You’ve arranged the feast?”

“Roasted lamb in pomegranate sauce, red wine, honey cakes...the traditional fare.” Mammon licked his lips, looking smug. “Plus a few *very* pricey touches. Matsutake mushrooms, white pearl caviar, rare truffles, some extinct crudités... Simple, but impressive. You will be pleased, I think.”

“I expect to be.” Lock was next on my list. “Security?”

“The demons are ready as always for a fight. And the lass...aye, she’s near ready too. I’d bet my boots on it.” Lock gave Evie a nod of approval, which made her smile.

“That just leaves the staging then.” I turned to Mulciber. “Any plans you’d like to share?”

“Until we have the venue, nothing solid.” Mulciber rested his hand on his cheek and sighed. “You let me know where we’re going, I’ll figure out something appropriate then. In the meantime, though—while I have your ears...”

He reached for his nursery blueprints again.

I stopped him with a glare. An unspoken *don’t even think about it*.

Mulciber folded his hands back into his lap, scowling like a petulant child. He was welcome to it.

We would talk babies and nurseries when the coronation was done. And even then, only when Evie was ready for it.

Until then, he could pout.

“That should be everything, then.” I patted Evie’s thighs. “Let’s get you in a nice bath upstairs, eh?”

“I’d like that,” Evie admitted with a little smile as she rose. She shifted that smile onto each of the Fallen in turn. “Thank you all for your efforts. I appreciate them, and I intend to make them worth your while.”

“Good girl.” I cocked my head toward the door. “Now. Let’s go.”

“Already?” Belial pouted. Her signature move. “But *I* have things I’d still like to discuss. And I’m sure I’m not alone.”

I groaned as Zeb rose. The smile on his lips couldn’t mean anything good.

“The two of you keep brushing poor Mulciber off every time he mentions his grand nursery plans.” Zeb walked in a slow circle around Evie and me, like a vulture preparing to swoop down on its prey. “Why?”

“A king should always be thinking of expansion,” Mammon added. “And there is nothing that expands quite so sweetly as a fertile belly bearing an heir.”

“Your tits would get bigger too,” Zeb pointed out with a leer at Evie’s sports bra. “It would be a good look on you.”

“Enough.” I held up a hand as Mulciber, his grin full of hope, inched a hand toward his blueprints again. “Whether or not Evie and I decide to have a child is none of your concern. The next person to so much as mention it to me will be using their small intestine as fishing lines in the shark pits. Have I made myself clear?”

Lock snorted and waved us out. “Get on wi’ ye, you two. Before they decide that the shark pits may not be such a bad fate after all, so long as they can keep on with their needling.”

I took the advice without another word.

The shark pits were nothing compared to this lot when they smelled blood in the water.

“I’m sorry,” I told Evie once we were at the elevator. “I’ll make them stop. That’s the last time that will happen. You have my word.”

“Everyone’s keen on a baby as long as they’re not the ones who have to incubate it.” Evie sighed, then looked up at me with hopeful eyes. “You really think I did well tonight?”

I beamed down at her, then placed a quick kiss on her lips. “You fought so beautifully; I have half a mind to send you back to the Fallen with your sword to teach them a lesson about sticking their noses in other people’s wombs.”

She laughed as the doors parted. “You know, if I wasn’t so beat, I might actually take you up on that.”

Phlegyas was strangely quiet as we rode back down to the ninth floor.

Too quiet—and as we prepared to step off the elevator, he caught my eye in a way that told me there was a reason behind his silence.

Fuck.

Something was wrong.

“You go on ahead, love.” I kissed Evie’s cheek and hung back in the elevator. “I have one more bit of business to attend to before I can turn in for the night.”

“Do you have to?” She turned and pouted softly at me. It was an infinitely more effective tactic coming from Evie’s soft, full lips than it

was from Belial's. She could give Bell a pointer or two, if she was of the mind to.

I glanced at Phlegyas, who looked more tense than ever.

"Unfortunately, yes." I sighed and gave her a tight-lipped smile. "But I'll be back soon. This shouldn't take long."

PHLEGYAS TOOK me up to the rooftop. I didn't bother asking why. I had a bad feeling I would discover whatever nonsense I had to deal with next as soon as I stepped out into the night.

And I was right.

A flash of white wings dove down from the sky. They smoked as they descended, coming down through the same rift between the realms that I navigated the helicopter through to take Evie to her classes.

"Good evening, adversary." Michael landed on the roof, a good distance away from me.

Too far away for me to kill with ease, a fact which I found deeply unfortunate.

After the meeting we'd just had with the Fallen, it would have been nice to hunt a rogue angel or two for sport.

"You're in the wrong realm, Archangel." Whatever this was about, I didn't have time for it. There was, I was all too aware, a naked woman currently climbing into a bubble bath in my suite. A naked woman who happened to be my wife—and therefore, a much better focus for my attention than conversing with angels. "You'll want to head back the way you came, take a sharp turn at the portal to Avalon, then aim for the skies."

"I'm right where I want to be, actually." Michael tucked his hands behind his back and gave me a smile I wanted dearly to strike right off his face. "Fancy that."

"You're not here to defect, surely." I wondered if I could kill him from here. He was catching fire already around the edges of his feathers. Here in Hell, he was weak enough that all it might take was a little stalling and a tiny shove off the side of the roof. It would solve a lot of my problems, if I could manage it. "If so, I regret to inform you that I've raised the bar on my recruitment standards significantly since the last time I offered. I'm not sure you'd currently make the cut."

"I'm only here to talk, adversary." Michael held his hands up as if to show me he held nothing in them that would bring me harm. I wasn't sure

how stupid he thought I was—I knew good and well he could still shoot Heavenly light from those same palms of surrender. “Can’t two old friends talk?”

“When one old friend calls the other ‘adversary’, you do have to begin to wonder if the friendship didn’t run its course a good while ago,” I pointed out.

Michael laughed. It was a bad sound, like wind chimes when you were trying to concentrate.

“Just little chat between respected enemies, then,” he said.

I nodded to the way his left wing seemed to be entirely aflame. Angels burned here in Hell, same as demons burned on heavenly turf. “Big risk for a little chat.”

“You and your bride seem to be evading all the little accidents we’ve arranged quite well,” Michael said conversationally. “Congratulations are in order. You’re finding such success in this cycle. It’s truly an impressive feat.”

“If you wanted to send congratulations, you could’ve just ordered an edible arrangement. Or a greeting card—Hallmark has such precious ones these days.”

Could I get to him before he realized I planned on pushing him off into Hell below, I wondered? I’d never tortured an angel in Hell before. It could be fun—and he certainly deserved it more than most.

“We’ll have to up the ante soon.” Michael smirked and gestured to the dark reflection of Las Vegas below. “A little joke. I know how much you love your gambling here in your city of sin.”

“Almost as much as you love your accidents.” I shrugged. If I kept him bantering like this, he might burst into flame completely enough that I wouldn’t even have to push him. He’d turn himself to ash chuckling at his own stupid jokes. “Personally, I’d call them assassination attempts—but to each their own.”

“What if I told you I’d thought up a way to put an end to these... accidents. For good. What would you say then, I wonder?”

I arched a brow. “Interesting, I’d say. And highly suspicious.”

“Imagine, adversary, a once-in-a-lifetime chance to protect your bride forever. No more accidents. No more dying.” He grinned, so smug I started fantasizing about pushing him off the building again. “No more reincarnations, either. She’d be safe forever. Doesn’t that sound nice?”

“Too nice,” I grunted. Like every fantasy provided by Heaven always was in the end. “It sounds like you’re about to tell me the catch.”

“No catch. Not even a fall this time, if you can believe it.” Michael licked his lips. Never a good sign. “Just an offer based on some exciting new information I’ve been handed. An offer that you could say there might be, ah... *Hell to pay* if you were to refuse.”

I narrowed my eyes at him.

No. This couldn’t be good. Not at all.

“I’m listening,” I told him.

From the sounds of things, I didn’t have a choice.

EVIE

The bubble bath I took after my fight felt like Heaven—at least in part because it was hot as Hell. Icing my wrists and ankles, the way I always did now after a fight, wasn't quite as luxurious by comparison, but I was getting used to it.

My muscles ached, and my bones ached worse. But still...

I'd stared down each of my opponents tonight without flinching. I'd bested them each to roaring of a crowd of demons who were there to watch me fail.

I felt good.

I felt *ready*.

More ready than I'd ever felt in my entire life.

I spritzed myself with some Clive Christian No.1 and smiled as I basked in the sultry scents of its vanilla and rose.

I'd even held my own against the Fallen tonight. Apart from that awkward detour of conversation about whether I'd give Luke an heir soon, it had felt like a perfectly victorious evening.

There was just one thing missing now: Luke.

I dressed in a flowy black nightie that pushed my breasts up seductively and barely reached the tops of my thighs before I got into bed. As much as I wondered where he'd gone off to, I was more eager to know when he'd get back.

I wanted him. That was a little silly to say right now—I always wanted him, every time he was near—but *especially* tonight, I was longing for his kisses. His touch.

His cock.

We had a long way to go before my coronation was done, but tonight felt like a victory.

I'd proved myself at Might this evening.

Now, I wanted to celebrate.

And when it came to celebrating with Luke, we only really knew one way how.

I snuggled deeply into the pillows all around me, spread my knees beneath the warm, soft blankets and slipped my hand between my thighs.

Fuck. I was wet already. Probably a little from all the adrenaline and endorphins of the workout I'd gotten this evening, but it was rare that I could completely discount the effect Luke himself had on me.

"I'll come put you to bed soon, love," he'd told me, and with Luke, that usually meant I'd be writhing in pleasure from at least one orgasm before I went to sleep.

I couldn't quite bring myself to say the most important four-letter L word to him yet, but there was another one that I couldn't even pretend I wasn't neck deep in.

Lust.

I smiled to myself as I rolled my clit beneath my fingers and imagined Luke's tongue. It was never quite as good when I did it myself—Catholic guilt, maybe. Maybe just a testament to Luke's supernaturally excellent bedroom skills.

But I knew it would tide me over until he was here in bed with me again.

Fight, fuck and sleep. A perfect night.

I almost laughed as I realized how foreign that might have sounded to me only a few months ago.

Luke was right. I was changing.

And I was pretty sure it was for the better, too.

Pleasure flickered through my body in gentle ebbs and flows. I couldn't quite get myself there on my own at the moment, but it wasn't orgasm I was aiming for anyway.

Just...an outlet for my anticipation, I supposed.

A nice way to waste time until Luke came back.

Or so I'd thought.

I imagined Luke bending me over the piano in Heresy—the one where we'd played our song together one night, so many weeks ago now. I imagined Luke fucking me on the roof, our moans echoing out all the way across the dark reflection of Las Vegas that rippled out below.

I imagined him having me in every position, in every way.

Even, for a delicious moment that felt more sinful than any of the rest, I imagined him coming inside me. Getting me pregnant, birth control implant be damned.

Maybe some small part of me was almost ready to become a mother after all.

I imagined it all so intensely that without even noticing it, I drifted off to sleep. I floated on the edge of dreaming for a long while after, and stayed there until I heard the door open again.

"Luke?" I blinked my eyes open and held up a hand to block the brightness of the room around us.

I'd been so lazy and horny and spent that I hadn't even managed to turn out the light.

Luke stood there in the doorway with a dark, intense glower in his pale blue eyes. His usual smirk was gone. In its place was something even more alluring somehow.

A snarl.

I nearly asked if he was mad at me, but for every second we stared at each other, I knew that wasn't right.

There was desire in his eyes, too. A desire more unhinged and feral than I'd ever seen in him—but undeniably colored deeply with want.

Want of me.

"Come here, love." Slowly, he raised his hand and held it out to me. His voice was deeper than usual. His accent, even thicker.

"Don't you want to come to bed?" I wasn't sure what had come over Luke. I couldn't pretend that I didn't like it, either. But maybe it was worth knowing. "What's wrong?"

"There's something I want to show you." His hand didn't waver. His gaze stayed locked firmly on me. "Come here. *Now.*"

It didn't even cross my mind to disobey him. Whatever he wanted to show me must have been important to him—

And whatever he planned on doing to me when I saw it would make being hauled out of bed after midnight well worth my while, no doubt.

I slipped out from under the blankets and approached him slowly. My cunt was still slick from the way I'd been stroking it when I dozed off, but the way it was throbbing now made my earlier fantasies seem positively virginal by comparison.

"Okay. Show me, then." I reached out to take his hand, but I hesitated as my fingertips hovered over his palm. "Just let me get a coat on. Some shoes. Maybe some pants, too."

"No." Luke moved his head back and forth in a slow, singular shake. His eyes were burning. His gaze, hypnotizing. "Where we're going, you don't need any shoes. No coat, either."

He grabbed my hand and pulled me to his chest so fast, I barely even saw him move. There was just a blur, and I was in his arms.

His lips brushed against my ear. His teeth followed—then his voice, a low growl.

"And you sure as fuck won't need trousers, love. Not for what I plan on doing to you when we get there."

My breath hissed as I inhaled sharply.

God. The way he could wrack my body with need just from growling in my ear was enough that tonight, I didn't need our vows to obey him.

But first...

"Luke, is something wrong?" My voice was a whisper.

As sexy and devilish as Luke was, *this* wasn't like him. Not at all. And as horny as *I* was, I could tell there was something going on beneath his surface.

If something had happened—something horrible—or if something had changed—I wanted to know.

"I'm taking you to Hell, love." Luke tilted his head to the side and ran his thumb across my cheekbone as he glowered down at me. "If you won't come with me willingly, then I'll take you by force."

"But we're already in Hell," I pointed out as Luke took me to the window. "The Inferno—"

"It's only part of it." Luke's left hand gripped mine tightly as he unlatched the window with his right.

As he pushed it open, a gust of warm breeze kissed our bodies. It made me remember the way I'd tried to climb out of this same window once, on

that first morning I'd woken up in Luke's bed.

I'd been trying to escape him then. It felt almost like it had happened in another life now.

Now, I only wanted to be by his side.

Even when he was like this. Whatever had caused it.

Whatever it meant.

"You told me once that it never felt good to fall." I inched closer to him and pressed my hands to his chest as we stood at the edge of the open window. I found myself trembling as I looked down at the massive distance between us and the mirror image of Las Vegas beneath us. "It's a long way down, Luke."

"Do you trust me, Evie?"

I searched his eyes for a moment—for what, I didn't know.

I already knew the answer to Luke's question.

I knew it in my ribs, and in my heart, and in my soul.

"Yes," I said. "I trust you completely, Luke. With my whole life."

The words barely had time to leave my lips. In an instant, Luke wrapped his arms around me, squeezing me tight against his chest.

The next moment, before I even had a chance to make sense of what was happening, we were out the window. Plummeting together, headfirst towards the ground.

As my heart lodged itself in my stomach, I realized that Luke shouldn't have asked me if I trusted him.

He should have asked me if I had lost my fucking mind.

Either way, I supposed the answer would have been the same.

Yes.

I clenched my eyes shut and clung to Luke like my life depended on it.

Now that he'd gone and thrown both our bodies out the window, I didn't see that I had any other choice.

But after several long moments of terror, I finally found the courage to open my eyes.

It was only then that I realized we weren't falling at all anymore.

We were flying out over the night, horizontal now. Airborne.

I stared down at the dark echo of The Strip in awe. So many dimly glowing neon lights. So many cars racing through the streets and tall, foreboding buildings—and somehow, we were floating over them, safe and sound.

“Luke... How—” I looked up at him, still a little stunned at what was happening.

But whatever awe I felt over the fact that we were flying was nothing compared to surprise that hit me when I saw Luke’s face.

His eyes had turned to embers. No longer pale. No longer blue. Now, his pupils were pinpricks of coal. His irises around them extended all the way to his lash lines, aflame in bright oranges and deep reds. The colors shifted slowly, like molten metal.

Like live flames, just barely contained.

Twin horns protruded from both of Luke’s temples. They were black and thick, curved and curled like a ram’s.

Not the horns of some cartoon devil.

The real horns of the one true Satan. Lucifer. The Dawnstar.

The adversary himself.

His skin had changed too. It wasn’t black like the horns, or even red. If anything, he was paler than ever now.

He didn’t just glimmer anymore.

He glowed.

Luke’s shirt hung off him in tatters. Beneath it, his skin radiated a shimmering aura, like he was giving off enough heat that it was visible to the naked eye. He felt hotter than usual too. His warmth kissed my skin like the comfort of a bonfire on a dark, cold night.

His shoulders were broader. His arms bulged, more muscular than ever, lined with thick, throbbing veins.

But by far, the biggest change of all in Luke—maybe the most important one—was his wings. Huge ones. They were made of black feathers, glossy like obsidian.

Every time they flapped, they propelled us forward across the starless, infinite sky.

“But they took your wings.” It seemed like a stupid first thing to say, but it was the only thing I could force out of my mouth. “I’ve seen the scars myself.”

“These are new wings. Not Heaven’s. Only my own. All of this is my own. My truest self.” He glanced down at me and a flash of brief curiosity passed over his stoic face. “Are you afraid?”

The way he was looking at me, I couldn’t even tell if he cared whether the answer to that was *yes* or *no*.

I knew what any rational woman would have said. *Yes. Of course I am.* Luke was handsome as ever—maybe even more so. But it was a terrible handsomeness. Demonic, even.

If I'd been a rational woman, looking up at him like this would have struck fear straight through me in an instant.

But then again, a rational woman wouldn't have let Luke leap out of a window with her in his arms, either.

Logic dictated that I'd ever been a rational woman, I sure as hell wasn't anymore.

"No," I said softly. "Not at all."

He didn't say anything back to me after that. A small nod was I all got.

We flew in silence, until the dark vision of Las Vegas had faded away. Slowly, lava, cracked earth and brilliant bursts of flame came to take its place.

And then I saw it. On the dark horizon in the distance, a black silhouette rose up through the heat that made my entire body feel like it was on fire as well.

"Pandemonium," Luke growled before I could ask. "Our palace, looking out over our realm."

Our realm.

Suddenly, my coronation didn't even feel like it mattered anymore.

Here in Luke's arms, I already felt like the Queen of Hell.

Luke landed us on a balcony made of marbled black stone swirled with gold and flakes of red. Its doors opened for us as Luke drew me to it.

The moment before we stepped inside, Luke swept me off my feet and carried me across the threshold instead.

"Our bedroom," he explained as he took me inside. The room was lavishly decorated in more black and gold. A fire burned in the marble fireplace alongside one wall. The others were lined with bookshelves, even larger and more impressive than the ones in Luke's suite.

"Our...bedroom." I had to repeat those words, just to make them real.

Luke had seen the room I'd grown up in. Tiny, cluttered with posters and books and knickknacks of my youth.

Compared to that, this room seemed far too good to be true.

Compared to *anything*, this was too good to be true.

Luke turned once we were inside the room. He strode toward a massive four-poster bed with a black velvet canopy and thickly gathered drapes.

“Our bed,” he said simply.

Our bed.

He laid me down on it gently, but every move he made had a roughness to it, too. Like he was barely containing some evil urge inside him.

His body was tense with it. His jaw was clenched and no matter how long he stared down at me, his eyes still burned.

“I love you, Evie.” He said it like an apology. Like an inevitability, too. “Damn me for it if you will, but I do love you.”

He undid his belt with a sharp jerk of his hand. The buckle broke instantly. The leather gave way with a *snap*.

“I’ve always loved you.” He tore his slacks away next. They shredded to rags anyway, like his shirt had been. Beneath them, Luke’s thighs were monstrously muscled and thick—just like the rest of him. “I always will. From the beginning of time—” He curled his fingers beneath a tear in his shirt and ripped it apart like it was nothing more than tissue paper. “Until the end of it.”

He took a step forward, then another. Each slow and measured. Each backed with enough carefully caged power that it made me tremble, even worse than I had when I was certain we’d been falling to our mutual deaths.

And still, I wasn’t afraid of him—even though I knew with every cell in my body that I should have been.

He took my knees in his hands and shoved them apart like they were an inconvenience to him. A thick, forked tongue, deep red in color, curled up over his lower lip as he stared down at my cunt.

I knew exactly what he was licking his lips over. My pussy was so wet, the golden curls of hair on the lips were no doubt dark and glistening with my honey. Proof of my lust.

“I love you,” he said again. He blinked, and his eyes burned even brighter. “And now I’m going to hear you say it too. Even if I have to fucking make you.”

Only then did I see a glimmer of the Luke I knew. A smirk flashed across his lips, darker and more sinister than any smile he’d ever given me before.

“Especially if I have to make you.”

His tongue claimed me first. The fork in it turned out to be as devilish as it looked. He pressed it to my clit, stroking up and down so fast, I

immediately determined that Luke must have been responsible for the vibrator industry.

If sex toy companies could only replicate the motions of Luke's tongue, they'd put every man on Earth out of sexual commission within week.

But Luke's tongue was just the beginning.

He had much bigger plans for my pussy than just a taste.

His fingers were thicker than I'd ever seen them before. As he slipped one into my folds, my cunt throbbed in response like it had just been entered by a cock.

Fuck. Already, I could feel the orgasm rising up in my core. Heat throbbed through me, setting every cell in my body aflame. When I tilted my head back to moan, light strobed behind my eyelids.

My breathing was short and staggered. My hips moved along with his every come-hither against my G-spot, rolling like waves.

"Please," I panted. I knew he could have teased me like this for an eternity, but he'd gotten me so close to orgasm so quickly, my body was too impatient to wait.

"Yes, love. That's right." Luke's eyes flashed up at me, full of hungry flame. "*Beg.*"

He withdrew his finger from me in an instant. I whimpered at its absence.

So close. *So fucking close*—but Luke had other plans for my body.

Plans that I was hardly in a position to try and stop now that they were in motion, even if he'd given me reason to want to.

He hadn't.

I wanted him. All of him.

In whatever way he chose to give me.

His hands curled around my hips. With a sharp tug, he jerked my body to the edge of the bed.

His cock slapped against my stomach as he forced his thighs between mine. When I looked down, I nearly went dizzy with the mix of emotions that spun through my head.

Worry as I realized how thick his cock was in his current form. His tip was flushed dark red, already dripping with precum that burned deliciously as it fell onto my skin.

Fear as I realized as thick as his cock was, his length was even more impressive. With his balls pressed against my pussy like this, I could see exactly how deep inside me he could go.

His tip was resting well past my belly button. And as impossible as I knew it would be for him to fit all of that within me, I also knew that when it came to the impossible, Luke always thought it was worth a try.

And maybe most terrifying of all was the final emotion that rushed through me.

Desire. Want. Brazen, shameless *need*.

In his current form, he could fucking ruin me. He could break my body with a single thrust.

And if I was still alive at the end of it, I knew I'd thank him for it.

He smirked cruelly as he saw those emotions flash through my eyes.

"I thought you'd like that." He moved his lips to mine, like a predator eager to taste its prey. "You'll like it inside you even more."

As he kissed me—slow and passionate, but with a rough brutality that left me aching for more of him with every movement of his lips against mine—he shifted his tip to my entrance.

My eyes shot open wide as he pressed his cock inside.

His thrusts were slow at first. They had to be. Anything else would have broken me in an instant.

But slow didn't mean gentle. Especially not when it came to Luke.

My fingers curled against the bulging muscles of his chest. I needed something to hold onto, but when I tried to press my nails into his skin, it was like trying to cut stone with a butter knife.

There would be no scratch marks down Luke's back tomorrow morning. Not in the form that he'd chosen to reveal to me tonight.

I trembled beneath him as he stretched me to fit his needs. The clawing at his chest quickly turned to my fists pounding against his pecs. My entire body was pounding with his every thrust. Each movement of his hips was timed to match my heartbeat.

But my pulse was quickly picking up the pace. Slow and steady turned to a gallop turned to an outright sprint.

I didn't know how my body was able to take it. Sight and sound blurred together with a sudden intensity.

The rest of the world stopped mattering. Maybe even stopped existing. And through it all, Luke's lips refused to leave mine.

I didn't want them to.

I didn't want to feel anything else ever again.

"Luke." I finally had to pull away from his kiss, just to gasp for air. To breathe his name. "Luke, I don't—I can't—"

"You'll take it, love." Luke was in no mood for bargaining. I knew in my heart I didn't want him to be. "You'll take every fucking inch, and you'll come around me like the perfect, cock-crazed creature you truly are, and you'll tell me you fucking love me. You'll scream my fucking name."

And in the next instant, I proved him right.

Not because he'd ordered me to. Not because I wanted to. I didn't even have to try—to obey him, or to hold myself back.

The way his cock thrust up into my core did all the work for me. My mouth fell open in scream, and his name tumbled from my lips.

"Luke! Fuck—Luke!"

"No," he growled, thrusting deeper still. "My name, love. My true name."

"Lucifer." In that moment, it was the only name that fit. My soul unraveled as my body was wracked with pleasure. It slammed through me, sinful and relentless, like the beating of a war drum hammering all around.

I was gasping for air, but not because I needed to breathe.

I only needed him. More of him. Him, forever. Him alone.

"I love you." The sound was desperate. The voice that said it was my own, but it sounded so distant that I had to cry the words out again just to try to find my way back to any semblance of reality. "I love you. God—Lucifer—*Luke*. I love you. I love you. I love you."

Somewhere beyond the black velvet throes of pleasure, Luke's lips found mind again. In the same moment, my hands found his horns. My fingers curled around the rough ridges of them, holding on for dear life.

I blinked, and the world snapped back into place.

We were both covered in sweat. Both panting.

One look into the flames of Luke's eyes told me we were both exhausted as well. His irises smoldered, glowing embers kissed by fire. My body felt so weak, I had to struggle all the more to keep hold of him.

If I let go, I was all but certain that I would float away at the slightest sensation of his breath against my skin.

I'd been so lost in my own pleasure that I hadn't even felt him come. But when he slipped his cock from me, I felt a flood of his seed spill out

from my folds in its wake.

Fuck. Had I just momentarily lost my mind?

Maybe so. To miss something like that, I must have.

He eased my fingers away from his horns and pulled my body against his with a slow, steady precision. One by one, my fingers released him. When he'd freed himself of my grip completely, he lay on the bed behind me and pulled my body toward him, until I was curled safely in his arms.

I felt like a stolen woman then. Something this monster of a man had taken for his own, laid claim to, and now possessed completely. Mind, body, soul—the whole lot.

A saved woman, too. Saved from what, I didn't yet know—but lying there in his arms, I'd never felt safer in all my life.

"Love you, Evie." Luke murmured against my ear. It sent a warm shiver through my entire body. Like an electric current, steady and strong. "Love you like a shadow loves the sun."

Fuck.

He really was too good to be true.

And tonight, after all he'd shown me... Tonight was as good of a time as any to let him know.

I took a deep breath, set my jaw, and made my mind up once and for all.

"Luke, I need to tell you something," I said as I rolled over in his arms. "I—"

My brow furrowed as I scanned his face. Luke's eyes were closed. His breathing was deep and slow. His eyelashes fluttered slightly, like he was already lost somewhere in his dreams.

He was asleep.

In any other situation, I would've nearly laughed.

Here I was, about to confess my undying love and devotion to my husband. Properly. Sincerely. For the first time that actually counted.

And he was *asleep*.

That wasn't what made me knit my brow together, though.

I could appreciate a certain amount of cosmic misfortune. Unfortunate circumstances had been following Luke and I around like a black cloud since the beginning of time itself.

No, it was the look on Luke's face that bothered me in that moment.

Usually, he smiled in his sleep.

Tonight, though...

Tonight, his face was contorted in a frown.

My heart plunged into my stomach in an instant. I didn't dare wake him up. Whatever he'd had to do while I bathed tonight, it had obviously been something intense.

But whatever that frown on his gorgeous face meant—whatever had put it there—

I knew it couldn't mean anything good.

EVIE

That night with Luke would linger in my mind forever. I knew it like I knew the color of the sky just before a storm.

Even if I died in this lifetime again.

Even if all our best-laid plans turned to ash in our fingers and we had to start all over again.

Somehow, I knew I'd remember the way to have Luke at his most hellish, and to revel in the intensity of his love anyway.

"Up or down, my queen?" Phlegyas gave me a low bow, sweeping his arm out and waving his hand with a flourish as I entered the elevator alone a few weeks later. "And might I add that your new wardrobe suits you well?"

"Suits me, huh?" I glanced down at the tailored slacks and suit jacket I wore over a black lace corset and laughed at his pun. "You've got a wicked sense of humor, Phlegyas."

He smiled. "For you, my queen, I do try."

"Take me up, please. Fourth floor. I'm meeting my friends at Avarice to blow off a little steam."

"Are you stressed, my queen?" Phlegyas's smiling face shifted to a frown of concern in an instant. "Surely the plans for the coronation have all been laid by now."

"They have been," I said with a sigh. "Easter Sunday at the Devil's Punchbowl, out in the San Gabriel Mountains."

Phlegyas furrowed his brow. "But that's in Los Angeles County, isn't it?"

"It is." I shrugged. "Lock suggested it. He doesn't think the angels would ever guess we'd hold the coronation for the Queen of Hell on their own turf."

"And I suspect that he's right. A very interesting choice." Phlegyas hit the button for Avarice and the doors closed.

We ascended in silence for a few moments, but the way Phlegyas kept glancing over at me told me he had something more than comments on my outfit and questions about my coronation on his mind.

"Are you all right, Phlegyas?" Luke was always kind to the stout, steel-haired elevator operator. I didn't see any reason why I shouldn't be as well. "You look a little stressed yourself."

"Me?" Phlegyas looked stunned for a moment, then laughed. "No, my queen. It is only...well, I'm concerned for you, a little."

"Really? Why?" Phlegyas had managed to pique my interest with that comment.

Maybe he knew something about the coronation that I didn't.

"Nothing serious, I'm sure. It's only that you're looking a little thin, my queen. Pale and tired, too. Have you been feeling all right lately? Eating enough? Sleeping enough?"

I breathed a little sigh of relief, trying hard not to make it too obvious.

Phlegyas must have been an incredible father, once upon a time. Even while I was dressed to the nines in full hair and makeup, he'd found me out at just a glance.

"I haven't been feeling the best lately, no," I admitted. "Just nerves, probably. Luke's been gone a lot lately." That was an understatement. Ever since the night in Pandemonium, he'd been away on business nearly every day. "And my parents are flying in to stay with us soon, so they can be there at the coronation. I... haven't exactly told them that I've, um, become a Satanist yet, so to speak. I don't know how they'll take it."

"May I give you a word of advice, as a father myself?" Phlegyas asked.

"Of course." Maybe a word of fatherly advice was all that I needed to set me straight.

Phlegyas turned to me and took one of my hands in both of his.

"A parent's love is infinite and eternal," Phlegyas assured me. His eyes glistened a little, like there were tears in them that he couldn't quite cry.

“Whatever you are, whatever you become, they’ll understand and love you just the same.”

“Thank you, Phlegyas.” It was obvious that he meant what he said.

I only hoped that the love he had for his daughter was the same kind my parents had for me.

The doors opened onto the fifth floor as Phlegyas dropped my hand. He gave me another bow and backed away quickly. Like he was embarrassed, almost.

I gave him a warm smile before I left.

It felt like he needed it.

“Eves!” On the floor of Avarice, Ava spotted me first. She ran to me in her heels and threw her arms around me for a hug. “Oh my god, you look—”

“*Wrecked*,” Bea finished for her as she shoved Ava aside to claim a hug of her own. “I mean, the hair, the makeup, the outfit—all very good. But I’d be a bad friend if I didn’t point out that you *obviously* need this tonight.”

“You shouldn’t have skipped out on meeting us at Vexations before this.” Joan placed a kiss on my cheek when Bea released me. “A facial, a pedicure and some vegetables on your eyes might help more than gambling, hon.”

“They were cucumbers,” Ava corrected Joan with a giggle. “Not just *vegetables*. I think we even spotted Genghis Khan sporting some.”

I tried to imagine a Mongolian warlord in a fluffy towel and slippers with cucumbers over his eyelids. The result made me join Ava in her laughter.

“Maybe I’ll drag Luke up there too,” I mused. “If I ever get a chance, anyway. He’s been way busier than I have lately. We probably both need a little time to relax.”

Imagining Luke with cucumbers over his eyes made me laugh even harder than imagining Ghengis Khan—but unfortunately, the girls didn’t join in this time.

“You two haven’t been spending time together?” Bea asked, her voice tinged with concern. She hooked her arm into mine and led me toward the bright, blinking lights of the slot machines. “We figured the two of you were still holed up in your honeymoon suite, fucking like bunnies.”

“*Demonic* bunnies,” Joan added, linking arms with Bea.

“We have been,” I assured them. No matter what happened, sex was always the least of my problems with Luke. Every night when he returned from his business travels, he’d been especially loving lately, even. Rough, but sweet. He still fucked me like every time might be our last. “But all these business trips... He brought me pasta carbonara from Rome earlier this week—still warm. Dates from Israel yesterday.”

“That doesn’t sound so bad.” Ava curled her fingers around my arm on the other side of me, completing the chain. “Pasta is always good.”

“It is,” I agreed. “I just wish I knew what he was doing. I’ve tried to ask, but he always dodges the question. And he seems...stressed, too, I guess.”

“Stressful times.” Joan tutted and shook her head. “Lock is on edge too. He seems distracted, and he hasn’t been around to train with me in Might as often lately. Maybe he’s away on business with Luke too.”

“Are you and Lock...” I probably shouldn’t have asked, but I couldn’t help myself.

Plus, it took the focus off me for a little bit. With the coronation coming up, every moment that I hadn’t been working on my thesis or teaching at UCLA had been spent in a flurry of dress fittings and menu tastings.

Not being the center of attention for a while might have been just what I needed.

“Oh, they’re obviously fucking,” Bea answered for Joan.

“Obviously.” Joan rolled her eyes. “It’s just every now and then. The fighting, you know—it *does* get your blood up.”

I laughed. “I know what you mean.” My training had tapered off right along with Luke’s sudden business trips, but the nights that I spent in Might while I waited for Luke to get home usually ended with some *especially* spectacular sex. “Good for you, Joansie. You’ve needed someone like him for a while now.”

“It’s nothing serious,” Joan said firmly. “Not like Ava and Mal, for example.”

“Joan!” Ava’s cheeks went pink in an instant as we sat down at the slot machines. “We’re not serious either. Seriously.”

“He’s been taking Ava to swanky celebrity parties all over Los Angeles,” Joan said with a smirk. She opened her wallet and scooped out a handful of quarters, then deposited a pile in front of each of us. “They

usually get crashed by those weird, brainwashed humans, of course—but that just gives Mal a chance to go full cowboy.”

“Ava...” I frowned. “You’ve been attacked too?”

“Only a few times,” Ava said with a shrug. “It’s nothing serious. Mal always gets me out in time—and it’s not like the starlets and stunt men even notice.”

“Usually because they’re in on it. She nearly got stabbed by Tom Hanks last week.” Bea picked up a quarter and placed it into the machine’s slot, but it was too small. The quarter plunked down into the machine’s payout tray without activating it. “Huh. That’s weird.”

“Oh! No, I’m just stupid. I completely forgot.” Ava pointed across the casino’s floor at a row of art deco-styled machines that looked kind of like ATMs. “We have to go over there. You can only gamble with house currency here.”

“Like poker chips?” I asked.

“Kind of,” said Ava. “C’mon. I’ll show you.”

We left the slots and headed over to the wall of ATMs. Ava posted up in front of one but didn’t reach for her purse.

I didn’t see a place for a credit card on it, anyway. There was only a small lever on the side of each machine, plus a tray where I guessed the chips must have come out.

“How do you pay?” Bea asked. She already had her credit card in hand. As she shoved it up against the machine’s golden exterior, nothing seemed to happen. “Is it voice activated? That doesn’t seem secure, but...”

“No.” Ava pushed Bea’s card back down, then grabbed the lever. “It, um. It just knows how much to give you, I guess. You pull this.” Ava tugged the lever down. “And then...”

A shower of black chips tumbled down into the machine’s tray. Ava gathered them up in a golden cup she pulled from beneath the machine, then shook it with a grin.

“See?”

Joan snorted. “It’s like a slot machine for people who don’t like to lose. And they call this place Hell...”

“Mal says that they’re...well, they represent all the good deeds you’ve ever done. Even the small ones.”

Joan groaned as she gripped the lever of the machine in front of her. “Great. So I’ll be gambling with chump change.”

But as Joan pulled the lever, a similar number of chips flowed down. Her cup ended up being nearly as full as Ava's.

"Huh." Joan raised her eyebrows, surprised. "I guess all those times I decided *not* to beat the snot out of shitty men must count, too."

"*Everything* counts. But we should be careful, too," Ava warned. "Mal says that the machine doesn't give you all of them at once, but once you've lost everything you have banked up, they're gone for good."

"It's a solid plan for stopping a gambling addiction, at least." Bea breathed a sigh of relief as her own machine rewarded her with a large pile of chips. "Oh, good. They obviously haven't taken chips away for every time a guy's sent me a dick pic and I've snitched on him to his mother either."

I moved to a fourth machine and gripped the lever, feeling a sudden flush of nerves.

It was a nerve-wracking thing, after all. Now that I knew the girls had all done enough good that they had plenty to gamble with, I wondered if I measured up the same.

I always tried to be kind, but I knew I hadn't always succeeded.

And on top of that, I was the Devil's own wife. The things Luke and I did in bed hardly counted as kindnesses, after all.

I enjoyed them way too much for that.

But to my relief, a torrent of chips fell down in my favor as well. When I picked one up and studied it, a little flutter of happiness showed up in my stomach.

The words, *did the dishes without being asked*, were written on one side of the chip in gold cursive. When I turned it over, I laughed.

And didn't complain about it later, was written on the other side.

Buckets of chips in hand, we went back to our chosen slot machines. As soon as we put our chips into them and pulled their levers, the wheels behind the glass spun frantically.

Mine all ended up on images of matching black pitchforks. A winner.

The machine lit up and dinged gently to congratulate me. A second later, a wave of chips tumbled out into the slot.

These only had the Inferno's name written on them, which was fine by me. I didn't like the idea of gambling with my past kindnesses anyway.

It seemed like a much better idea to use my winnings to hedge future bets.

“You know, we haven’t talked about *your* love life yet, Bea,” Ava said with a sly smile as she caught Bea checking her phone. “New man in your life too?”

“What?” Bea blinked, then shoved her phone back into her purse. “No. Just my mother, reminding me that I have dinner with my future husband-to-be and his family next week. Nothing more.”

“Ugh. You ultra-billionaire old money people creep me out, Bea—no offense,” said Joan. “The whole arranged marriage to consolidate wealth thing... It’s kind of medieval, isn’t it?”

“Our parents jointly own a shady international banking empire. It’s normal.” Bea pulled the lever of her slot machine down a little harder than she needed to. “And at least I’m still allowed to date for fun until we’re finally forced to seal the deal.”

“Are you seeing someone at the moment, then?” I asked. “I felt so bad about not being in LA when your date stood you up last month. It’d be nice to know you’re seeing someone a little more polite now.”

“That was a mess. Not your fault.” Bea frowned as her machine rolled up three green, glowing occult symbols. “I’ve just been going out a little, here and there. I’m sure future Mr. Bea is doing the same.”

“Maybe you should see if Don is available,” Joan teased with a twitch of her dark brows. “I bet he’d at least be up for an excellent prearranged-marriage fu—”

“Oh, God, Eves! I meant to tell you. I’ve only just now remembered.” Bea changed the subject abruptly and pulled out her phone again. “Have you been keeping tabs on Adam at all lately? Because, um...”

“No,” I said with a shrug. Honestly, I’d mostly forgotten about Adam. Luke took up so much space in my head most days that it was sometimes hard to remember my ex-fiancé at all. “I mean, he dragged us all here to Vegas, cheated on me in the most blatant and egregious way possible... And I’m married to someone better now anyway. I don’t really think of him at all.”

I hoped I didn’t sound like I was gloating, but when the time came to talk of Adam and his miraculous, coke-fueled angelic orgy, sometimes it was a *little* nice to brag.

“Okay, well... I hope this doesn’t harsh your Zen, but I think you should probably see this.” Bea pulled up Instagram on her phone and handed it to me. “It’s too creepy not to show you, frankly.”

I squinted at the post she'd pulled up. There was Adam, all right, looking lanky as ever with a broad grin on his face. He was wearing a tuxedo t-shirt—something he'd always told me was *beyond tacky* when we'd been together.

And there, tucked beneath his arm and grinning just as broadly, was...

Me.

"What?" I pinched my fingers over the photo on the screen, then expanded it. "Did he...clone me, or something?"

This woman had my smile. My hair. My hooded gray eyes—even my nose was the same as hers. She was wearing an American flag bikini that her tits were practically spilling out of.

Most confusing of all, she was flashing *my* engagement ring. Or the one that used to be mine, before Adam's orgy debacle. It looked identical to the one that Adam had given me.

The one that I'd made a point of losing outside the Bellagio on the night that Luke and I had eloped instead.

"Cloning was my first thought too," Bea admitted as I passed the phone to Ava so she could have a look. "Her name is Evangeline Seraphino, apparently. He's tagged her in it. And get this—"

Ava squeaked with terror and shoved the phone away. "She's only got photos of her and Adam on it. It's like her life only started the day they got engaged."

Joan grabbed the phone from Ava and drew back with disgust. "Yeah. Definitely a clone. You leave your hairbrush at Adam's place or something, Eves? This girl was almost certainly grown in a test tube full of science liquid."

"I mean, that's not possible—cloning takes more time than that, *and* it's illegal to clone humans, but..." Ava gave me a sympathetic shoulder-hug. "I'm sorry, Eves. That's really, *really* fucking weird."

"Yep." I tried to feel something about all of this, but all I got in return was a queasy feeling in my stomach. It was the same feeling I'd been getting a lot lately. It made eating less fun and left me feeling green any time I even *thought* about drinking booze. I'd been stone sober ever since the night Luke had taken me to Pandemonium, in fact. "It's weird, but that's not my problem anymore. Maybe his angel friends felt sorry for him and made him an Evie 2.0 as a consolation prize."

From what Luke had told me about the beginnings of humanity, it wouldn't be the first time they'd done something like that. I was *the* Lilith, Adam's first mate who'd just liked sex too much to be compatible with him.

Maybe they'd made this new woman out of Adam's rib. Biblically, it checked out.

"Well, from what I've heard about the angels..." Bea stopped mid-sentence and blinked, then shook her head. "They're just creeps is what I've heard. That's all. And this is definitely creepy enough to be right up their alley."

"Where have you been hearing things about angels?" I didn't want to press Bea but considering that the angels were the ones who were systematically brainwashing humans to attack us all, it seemed like anything she knew was probably worth sharing with the class.

"People talk here." Bea shrugged, then looked around the casino. "Look, I'm bored of the slots. Let's go play some roulette."

As we gathered up our cups of chips, I realized I wasn't having nearly as much fun with the girls as I'd hoped tonight.

Adam's new wife, my very own doppelganger, freaked me out a little, sure. But what really bothered me was what Bea had said—or, I guessed, what it seemed like she'd stopped herself from saying.

Bea had been hearing things about the angels from someone. Maybe she really had just heard them around the Inferno. Maybe from Don when he'd rescued her from that failed date in Los Angeles.

But it made me realize how few opportunities I'd really had to ask Luke about anything of the things *I* wanted to know of late.

I wanted to know where he'd been going all these weeks. I wanted to know why. I knew it wasn't any of my business. But then again, as his wife...maybe it was.

That night that he'd taken me to Pandemonium, something had been wrong. Something that had turned him darker and rougher and fiercer than I'd ever seen him. I wanted to know that too.

And just before that, when he left me in the suite...something had set Luke off.

But what?

As we sat down at the roulette table, I lost myself in the blur of black and gold of the wheel spinning round, and round, and round.

I hadn't placed my bet yet, but I still couldn't help but wonder where it would stop.

LUKE

“The Sahara again, then.” Don yawned as we passed through the monochrome of the Abyss, searching for the right exit, while I carried the shovels.

“The Sahara again.” It was our fourth try at sifting through the desert’s shifting sands. Hopefully, our last. “It’s still there somewhere. Has to be.”

“In hindsight, I’m beginning to wonder if we shouldn’t have hidden them so well.” Don sighed. “Would have saved us a lot of effort.”

“And time,” I agreed. “But if we hadn’t, the angels might have found them first. Wouldn’t have anything to bargain with then.”

“Maybe you’re right.” Don came to a halt in the darkness where the edges of the Abyss were thin enough to slice through. “Just wish we didn’t have to bargain with them at all.”

“We don’t have a choice.” Michael’s offer had been an easy one to accept, at least.

I could either take it or lose her.

I’d promised her it wouldn’t happen again. It was a promise I intended to keep.

“What happened to not negotiating with terrorists?” Don glanced at me as he reached his fingers into the folds of darkness. “Or are we ignoring our principles now on top of giving into Heaven’s demands?”

“We’re all terrorists to someone, Abaddon.”

“Guess so.” Sunlight, heat and orange sand greeted us as Don pulled open a doorway to the Sahara. “At least it’s almost over. We get what we came here for, we hold the coronation, then—”

“No.” I shook my head and stepped back into the world again. “Let’s stay focused. I don’t want to be here any longer than we have to this time.”

I didn’t want to talk about what happened after the coronation.

I couldn’t let myself dwell on the reality of what came next.

“Tomb’s supposed to be over here, according to Alex.” Abaddon scoffed as we moved across the sand. “I had to promise him a round in Might against Lock, The Second, and The Fourth for it, but it should be worth it in the end.”

“The quicker the better.” I was as eager to be done with this as Don was. Probably even more so.

I’d spent the entire existence of humanity being parted from my wife. Forcibly. Horribly. Usually without warning.

I knew well enough by now that every moment I spent away from Evie was a moment I might never get back.

Now, more than ever, I wanted to be done with these ridiculous tasks so I could finally be back in bed with her for as long as the Almighty would allow.

“You must miss her.” I didn’t think of myself as an easy book to read, but Don knew the scent of despair well enough. I probably reeked of it.

“I do.” There was no point denying it. Every moment we were apart made me feel special types of pain I was only accustomed to feeling when I was waiting for her to reincarnate again. “That’s why I want this done.”

“Are you sure you want to do this at all, Dawnstar?”

“It’s the only way.” Something *thunked* against the toe of my boot as it tapped against a hard object beneath the sand. When I bent down to brush the sand off it, I found white marble beneath it.

Just where the Basileus of Macedon said it would be.

Alexander the Great’s long-lost tomb.

I handed Don a shovel, then pulled off my shirt.

Now, all we had left to do was dig.

“What about you and your lady love?” Sweat poured down my neck and trickled down my chest like I’d been caught in a rainstorm as I hoisted another shovelful of sand away from the tomb’s entrance. Not long now. We were nearly there. “Surely you miss her as well.”

“Can’t say I know what you mean.” Don dipped down and nudged the sand away from the entrance with the back of his shovel. “You know I’m hardly a one-woman man.”

“Not always.” I let out a breath, wiped the sweat from my brow, then drew my knife. “You and Evie’s friend Bea certainly had a type of chemistry. And I distinctly recall another Beatrice you loved once. Deeply.”

“A love that ended in great calamity,” Don groaned. “She married a banker, if you recall. Evie’s Bea is promised to one too.”

“No time like the present to rekindle an old flame.” I turned the knife over in my hand, then pressed it to my other palm.

Don watched the knife as it caught the sunlight. “Do you want me to do that?”

“Might as well be me.” I gritted my teeth and made the cut. Black, glimmering blood welled up from the slit I’d made across my palm. “Blood is blood.”

I pressed my palm to the door and let the black trickle down the white marble. It caught in invisible crevices, trickling and diverting as it followed their paths.

An intricate pattern began to form on the door. Blood flowed up and down, coloring in the lines.

There was a curse on Alexander’s tomb, just like any other. Malacoda had placed it there himself when we had hidden our secrets inside this place. For protection against curious humans and thieving angels alike.

“You do know I can tell that you’re fucking her, don’t you?” I turned to Don again as the blood finally filled the stone completely. “Evie might still be oblivious, but you can’t really hide sin from me.”

Don stared me down for a moment, blinked, then laughed.

“Fine.” Don held up his hands in surrender as I wiped mine clean on my trousers. “But it’s not me I’m telling the lie for. It’s her.”

“She’s not ashamed, surely.” I couldn’t imagine Don would be clumsy enough that he was failing to please her. “Maybe she’s afraid her fiancé will find out?”

We both stepped aside as the door fell to the sand then crumbled away into dust.

“It’s an arranged marriage. She’s only invested in it for money. Not love.” Don grabbed a torch that rested on one of the tomb’s inner walls and

offered it to me.

“The humans are still doing those?” I set the torch to light with a wave of my hand. It was news to me. I knew these things still happened in cultures outside my domain, but it surprised me to know it could occur close to home as well. “For what reason?”

“He’s the son of her father’s business partner. One of those too-big-to-fail banks. Joint ownership. They’re looking to keep it in the family after the old men kick the bucket.”

Don and I moved down the tunnel that would take us to our destination. It had twists and turns meant to trick unwelcome guests, but I knew them well.

“Surely they could do that without getting married. If they wanted to keep things in the family, their fathers could have tied the knot.”

“Apparently, their advertising board believes the customers would respond positively to a love story.” Don gave me a pointed look. “And before you ask, no, this isn’t one of the banks Adversary Industries already owns, and no, you cannot buy it. Bea’s family would never sell.”

“Could arrange a little deal with the Devil.” I had to admit, listening to Don’s love problems was a sort of blessing. Better than focusing on my own. “Bankers usually go in for this kind of thing.”

“For once in your life, Luke, it’d be best if you didn’t meddle.” Don shook his head. “Bea’s a proud thing. She doesn’t want to admit to her friends that she’s fucking a demon, and she definitely won’t like it if she finds out you’ve turned her life upside down on my account.”

“As you wish.” I wasn’t happy about it, but I could understand. “Just would’ve liked to leave someone with a happy ending when all of this is said and done.”

Evie would live. That was what mattered.

But as for a happy ending...

That wasn’t something that was in the cards for us anymore.

“Have you told her yet?” Don moved aside so I could enter the burial chamber ahead of him. I felt his eyes slide over me as he searched for my answer—and found it. “Of course you haven’t.”

“She’d only try to stop me.” *Put yourself in danger for me again, and I’ll kill you myself*, she’d told me after that first encounter with the angel-touched humans. I was sure she’d do her best to make good on that threat, too. “Better if she doesn’t know.”

“Do you think she’ll forgive you?”

I moved to the sarcophagus. It was intricately shaped, golden and beautiful.

For a moment, I had to admire it.

I’d been posing as an artist in those days, with Evie as my assistant. She’d kept her hair short back then and dressed like a man. It had fooled Alexander, but it certainly hadn’t fooled me.

Beauty like hers was always incredibly difficult to hide, no matter how she dressed.

Nostalgia washed over me as I traced the precious gemstones set into the gold, and I let it.

This piece, we’d created ourselves.

“No.” I drew my hand away and sighed. “I don’t suppose she will.”

“Do you think it will even work?” Don crouched down along with me. We both reached into the space beneath the sarcophagus, searching through the cobwebs in the dark. “It’s a gamble, you know.”

“And I own Las Vegas,” I reminded him. My fingers brushed aside centuries of dust. I knew we were close. I could feel it somewhere in this space, calling out to me. Any moment now, it would roll right into my hands. “No king of Sin City should be afraid of a little gambling.”

“You’re dealing with angels, Dawnstar. They always stack the odds in their favor.”

“True.” Something pinged beneath the sarcophagus. I reached out—and suddenly, there it was. Still pleasantly warm, just like it had been when I first placed it there. I drew it out in my fist with a smile. “But it’s a calculated risk.”

I unfolded my palm to show Don that we’d secured our prize. It was a nail, long and rough. The nail was a simple thing, but even after all this time, there wasn’t so much as a speck of rust on it.

“A calculated risk.” Don scoffed as he rose. “And for once, I’m finding myself questioning your abilities at math.”

WE EMERGED from the tomb victorious. I considered resealing it, but then thought better of it.

This discovery would make some fine archaeologist’s career someday—assuming that raiders didn’t pilfer it clean first.

“Seems like the perfect opportunity for Heaven to descend on us.” Don placed a hand over his brow as he raised his eyes to the sky. “Do you think we were followed?”

“I’m counting on it.” I tucked the nail into my pocket and grabbed my shirt from where it rested on the sand. “But for once, we’ve got nothing to hide.”

From anyone but Evie, at any rate.

“We’ll be back to Vegas soon at least.” Don reached into the air before him and opened the Abyss up once more. “This is all of them. Deed is done.”

Before I followed Don into the Abyss, I paused at the edge of it.

There was something peculiar there, growing up out of the sand. Pink petals that faded to white with a yellow center.

Sweet briar. *Rosa rubiginosa*.

An Eglantine rose growing here in the midst of the Sahara.

That was...strange, to say the least.

I bent down and plucked it off at its stem. I’d give it to Evie when I got back to the Inferno.

The last of my gifts to her from all my travels.

It wasn’t much in the way of an apology, but it was all I could give her without giving it all away.

She *would* kill me if she knew what I was up to.

Or, at least, she’d try.

I held the rose carefully as I followed Don into the Abyss.

Better me than her.

EVIE

I woke up on the day before my coronation with my legs tangled with Luke's beneath the sheets.

When I reached up to move my hair out of my eyes, I found the flower he'd given me the night before still tucked behind my ear.

I untwined it from my waves so I could give it a better look. When Luke got back last night, I'd had every intention of confronting him. Cornering him. Learning exactly where he'd been going, exactly why, and exactly what had possessed him to become so insanely fucking *secretive* all of a sudden.

But then he'd handed me the rose. He'd kissed me.

We'd made love.

Once again, Luke managed to distract me, fuck me, and leave me too exhausted in the aftermath to coo sweet nothings at him and fall fast asleep.

The rose was beautiful. Pink, yellow and white. An eglantine rose, just like the ones that grew outside of Limbo on the patio.

They were important to Luke, I knew. These were the roses whose vines he'd tried to climb back up to Heaven on right after his fall.

They were a reminder of his first failure after losing his angelic wings. Proof of defeat.

And yet, he still grew them. When he found them in the wild, he brought them back to me.

I pressed a kiss to his bare shoulder and tucked the rose behind his ear instead.

For all that talk of how prideful Lucifer was, Luke might have been the humblest man I'd ever know.

"Kissing me awake again, love?" Luke stirred as I pulled my lips away. I didn't have to see his face to know that he'd been frowning in his sleep again.

He'd been doing that every night for weeks now. Months, even.

There was no reason it had changed now.

"I just thought a little sugar first thing might brighten your mood." Luke might have managed to distract me last night, but he wouldn't do it again. "Since you've been sleeping so poorly lately and all."

"Have I been?" Luke rolled over to show me his smirk. His eyes were still half closed, but his hands sought out my body immediately. He caressed my hip a little clumsily, squeezing possessively as he moved down my thigh. "I wouldn't know it. I always sleep well as long as your body's here next to mine."

"Something's been wrong lately, Luke." I ran my fingertips across his cheek, letting his perpetual five o'clock shadow tickle at my skin as I gave him a sad smile. "I'd like to think that there's a good reason you're not telling me what it is."

"Mm. I see." Luke's smirk faded away. His eyes looked as mournful as my own felt. "And you want me to explain it to you. Lay it all out for you, so you can have peace of mind."

"My parents are flying in today, Luke," I reminded him. "Today's the day I'm supposed to explain to them..." Sparks flickered from my fingertips as I gestured to the room around us. "All of this."

"We will tell them." Luke raised his hand to mine. Our palms kissed as he twined his fingers into the spaces between my own. "Together. You and me. United. Husband and wife."

"I don't feel very united with you right now. Not after all these mysterious business trips. Not with the way you've started frowning in your sleep." I wanted to pull my hand away from his, but the way he held it still felt so...so *right*. Touching Luke, being close to him like this, was just about the only thing that had felt right about any of this for a while now. "Something changed in you that night you took me to Pandemonium, and I've been feeling the repercussions of it ever since."

Luke's brow furrowed. He let go of my hand to press the back of his palm to my forehead.

"You're warmer than usual. Are you feeling ill, love?"

"Yes, Luke." My temper flared up in my chest sharp and sudden as I swatted his hand away. "I'm pale, I'm losing weight, my stomach has been a stormy ocean made of *fuck* and even Phlegyas has noticed—but you haven't."

"You're sick, Evie." Luke moved his palm to my cheek, cupping it. "Let me heal you."

I wrapped my fingers around his wrist and shoved his hand away again.

"I'm sick with *worry*, Luke." All this anger should have felt righteous, but...it didn't. If anything, I was on the verge of crying. Out of nowhere. Like there was an evil little gremlin in my head, twisting my tear ducts mercilessly. "If you want to heal that, then please—just tell me what's going on."

Luke looked at me for a long time. I wished I knew what was going on behind those gorgeous, pale eyes of his.

I wished I could read his mind the way it felt like he was always so capable of reading mine.

"I've been a bad husband. You're right." Luke closed his eyes and tilted his head down like he was saying penance. Like he was in prayer. "I've been distracted. I've been greedy. I've been claiming your body without looking after it, and I've been keeping you in the dark for too long. It's not right."

"No," I said softly, a little stunned. It always surprised me how easy it was to argue with Luke. I was always braced for a blow-up. I usually got a simple, mature discussion in return. *Incredible*. "No, it's not."

"It's not," Luke echoed my echo. "Because you are the light of my life, Evie. You're the fucking sun. I'd die for you if I was able. I live between each of your short, tragic lives in the infinite hope that you'll come back to me just one more time so I can love you all over again."

"That's...sweet, Luke." It was. The things Luke said to me always were. There was just one problem. "But I asked for answers. Not poetry."

"That's a shame. I've got entire volumes of poetry I could write for you."

"Maybe later."

“Right.” Luke sighed. His fingers twitched toward me, like he desperately wanted to touch me and pet me like he always did. But we both knew that wouldn’t solve anything. The only thing that could do that was the truth. “I would give you your answers right now if I could, love. I will give them to you in time.”

“What if we don’t have time, Luke?”

We’d done so much to try to ensure that my coronation would end with a crown on my head instead of an arrow through my neck. But the truth was, the enemy we were up against was formidable. The chance this would all end in death and destruction all over again was still high.

“We have today, with your parents, and tomorrow...your coronation.” Luke gave up fighting his urge to touch me and gently laid his hand on my thigh. Even now, frustrated with him as I was, I couldn’t pretend that little point of contact between my skin and his didn’t feel like entire universes colliding. “After it’s all over, I’ll explain to you everything that’s been happening. No omissions. No lies. Then, I’ll take you to bed and fuck you like the ferocious, damned thing that I am. Just the way you deserve as my queen—my wife.”

“Two more days?” My stomach was already churning just thinking about how long these two days could stretch. “What if I need to know now?”

“You’re just going to have to trust me, Evie. I’m sorry to ask that of you.” His eyes met mine, piercing as ever, even through all the sorrow they contained. “Trust me as well that I wouldn’t ask that if I didn’t have to.”

I swallowed hard as the tears finally welled up in my eyes. I fought them back as best I could. I didn’t *want* to cry right now. I wanted to pound my fists against his chest. I wanted to yell, scream, break things.

Instead, all I could do was trust him.

Trust him while I tried not to let my tears turn to sobs.

“Okay.” My voice was hoarse as I croaked the word out. “Okay. Two days, then it’s over.”

“Because you trust me, love.” It wasn’t like Luke to beg, but there was pleading in his voice. In his eyes, too. “Because you know in your heart that I love you. That everything I do, I do to keep you safe.”

My lips twisted. My heart ached. Words wouldn’t come anymore. I clenched my eyes shut and nodded instead.

I knew Luke always acted to protect me.

I knew he loved me.

I trusted him.

And even though this was *certainly* not the time I wanted to tell him...

I loved him too.

I just hated that love had to be this goddamn *hard*.

"Come here, gorgeous girl." Luke wrapped his arms around me and pulled me to his chest. "Cry if you want to. Do whatever you need."

My tears softened as he pressed my cheek to his skin, but they didn't quite stop.

"This will be over soon," Luke whispered in my ear. "All of it. It'll all be over soon."

WHEN I WAS DONE CRYING my poor little heart out against Luke's chest, I felt better, but not whole.

My face was puffy. A facial at Vexations took care of that. My body ached. The hot stone massages that Luke and I got after the facials took care of that. But there was a tightness in my stomach that wouldn't go away, no matter how much primping and pampering I endured.

Trust him, he said.

Two days, he said.

But all through my manicure, my pedicure, the blow-out at Vexation's salon and the careful selection of a dress and make-up at Indulgence, I couldn't shake the feeling that in these two days, anything and everything that could go wrong somehow would.

The feeling only intensified when we headed down to Limbo to meet with my parents. Luke wore one of his best bespoke Italian suits. I wore a black Versace dress paired with red lipstick and Louboutins.

Normally, this look would have made me feel powerful. But given the revelations we were about to make to my parents—some of which were *literally* straight from Revelations itself—it was hard to feel anything but nerves as we sat down at our table.

"Promise me this is all going to be okay, Luke." Our entire marriage was running on a lot of promises right now. *Trust me. I love you. Two days.* One more couldn't hurt.

"I've put your parents up at the Bellagio and opened a tab for them there. No limits. Room service, drinks, gambling—anything they desire,"

Luke assured me. His hand moved to my thigh. He gave it a little squeeze as his eyes met mine. “More importantly, they love you—and they’re already Catholic. That’s half the battle, if you ask me. They already believe. If anything, learning the mechanics of all this should be a relief.”

“But will it be *okay*, Luke?”

Luke gave me a little smirk. “Yes, love. All of this—everything. It will all be okay.”

And damn me, that smirk was so charming and full of confidence, I believed him about that too.

My parents arrived a few minutes later. My mother was beaming in bright pink lipstick and a flashy sundress. As for my father, I’d never seen a man look more unhappy in a Hawaiian shirt.

“Evie! Oh, look at you! So dramatic!” I rose from my chair as my mother rushed over to hug me. She smelled like new, expensive perfume—a gift from Luke, no doubt. “Have you been losing weight?”

“A little,” I admitted. “New diet.”

If being too queasy to eat and throwing up when I tried counted as a diet, anyway.

“Hey there, princess.” Dad hugged me as well, and only gave a small glower at Luke as they shook hands. “You better be treating my girl the way she deserves.”

“She deserves more than any man could ever give her,” Luke said. “All I do is try my best every day to come close.”

Dad’s eyes narrowed suspiciously, but after a moment, he nodded.

“Good answer.” He pulled Mom’s chair out for her, then took his own seat. “You get points for that.”

I didn’t know what Dad’s score book looked like, but it seemed like a good omen.

However he tallied his points, he didn’t give them out easy.

I just hoped that we both wouldn’t be in the red by the time this conversation was done.

We ordered, ate, and chatted through the meal. Luke listened intently to all my mother’s teaching woes. When she mentioned the way she had to buy her own school supplies on her teacher’s salary, Luke even pulled out his checkbook and wrote her a check with a number so big on it, she almost swallowed her straw.

After a couple of beers, even Dad loosened up a bit. I didn't know how Luke managed it, but at one point, I even caught him chuckling at one of Luke's jokes.

It was all going so well; it was a shame that we'd have to ruin it all over dessert.

I waited until Mom was halfway through her chocolate lava cake to bring it up.

If my parents ended up storming out after, I wanted her to at least leave with the sweetness of chocolate in her mouth.

"Mom..." I glanced at Luke, and he gave me a little nod of encouragement. "There's something I want to tell you. Something I need to tell you both."

"Oh, Evie. You can tell us anything. You know that." Mom waved my words away. "Are you pregnant? Is that it? You've barely touched your cheesecake."

"No," I said with a nervous laugh. "That's not it. It's about...well, it's about Luke and me."

"Divorce then." Dad frowned. "That's a shame. I was just starting to like you, Luke."

"I'm glad to hear it." Luke placed his hand on top of mine. "I'm happy to report that divorce is the last thing on either of our minds."

"What is it, then?" Mom asked.

"We're all ears, princess."

I looked to Luke again.

This felt impossible.

No.

Beyond impossible.

"I don't even know where to start," I said with a sigh.

"Oh, sweetheart." Mom reached across the table to squeeze my other hand. "If you're not pregnant and you're staying married, is it really any of our business? You two are happy, right?"

"Yes." I gave her a tight smile. "Very."

"Then you don't need to explain anything to us. We *are* very modern, you know. Your father and I have been married for a long, long time." Mom patted my hand reassuringly. "If you two have decided to become swingers, or wangers, or whatever the kids are calling them these days—"

“Poly-armor-ous?” Dad looked to Mom for confirmation, but she only shrugged.

“I even read that *Fifty Shades* book last year, believe it or not. Not that I agree with all that contract stuff—seems pretty clinical, if you ask me—but I’m not here to yuck anyone’s yums.”

“It’s nothing like that,” I said, laughing. “Nothing even close.”

“Well, whatever it is, it sounds like you don’t need to explain it,” said Mom. “Every couple has their quirks.”

“But, Mom—”

“We’re just happy that you’re happy, Evie. It’s as simple as that.”

And just like that, Mom went right back to eating her dessert.

I let out a breath.

That...hadn’t gone the way I thought it would.

At all.

Luke and I couldn’t hide this forever. Whatever happened tomorrow at my coronation, I guessed my parents would just have to learn the truth then.

Some things really did have to be seen to be believed.

EVIE

“Looks like everyone made it.” I pulled back the flap of the tent that Luke’s demons had erected just beyond the coronation site to survey the crowd. “That’s...good. At least, I think.”

“Why wouldn’t it be?” Luke moved behind me and wrapped his arms around my waist. His hands came to rest over my belly. For a brief moment, the warmth from his palms relieved the nagging tension that had been there for more than a month now.

I closed my eyes and enjoyed it while it lasted.

I hoped once this coronation was over, that feeling would finally go away for good.

“You’re right,” I agreed with a sigh. “I’ve just been stressed. We both have.”

“Feeling excited?”

“A little.” I took one of Luke’s hands and moved it up a little, so it was resting over my belly button instead. “There’s a nice feeling in here. Like my belly’s full of moths fluttering around a streetlight.”

“Mm. I like that.” Luke worked his hand over my stomach in little soothing circles. “How are your nerves?”

“Pretty bad,” I admitted with a tired laugh. My entire body felt exhausted, even though all I’d done today was stand around while everyone else pampered me. “I kind of feel like one of those little wind-up monkeys—”

“The ones with the cymbals? And the little hat?”

I smiled. “Exactly. Only, someone has simultaneously dosed it with Ambien and...I dunno, meth.”

“Poor thing.” Luke held me closer and pressed his lips to my temple. “Try to relax, though. As much as you can. Look at how happy everyone is.”

I followed the direction of Luke’s finger as he pointed out my friends in the crowd seated in the white chairs his demons had set up on the rocky landscape.

Mal had his arm around Ava. He was idly playing with her hair behind her back—maybe so she wouldn’t notice the way he was admiring the way her red waves turned to fire in the sun.

A little further down the same row, Joan and Lock were tasting each other’s drinks and comparing swords. I couldn’t quite hear them, but I was pretty sure Joan was insisting that hers was longer.

That made me laugh. From the looks of things, she was probably right.

Bea and Don were engaged in an intense, enthusiastic argument. No surprises there. But they *were* talking to each other, and when Don rested his hand on Bea’s knee as he made his point, she didn’t shove him away.

Actually, if my eyes weren’t deceiving me, she actually leaned in.

The Fallen were in formation in front of the arbor that Luke would crown me beneath. Each of them was dressed in black. Belial was dressed in a barely there mini skirt and a midriff-bearing top, and Zeb was casually wielding a massive battle axe, but at least they looked prepared for anything—be it battle or rave.

Legion, Charon, and an entire host of demons in their best human disguises were all armed as well. In their laps, across their backs, and in their hands, they carried everything from butcher’s knives to sawed-off shotguns.

I even spotted The Fourth hanging out at the back near his bike with three other equally tall, helmeted bikers. They were dressed head to toe in white, red, black, and in The Fourth’s case, a rich, dark green that suited him better than I would have expected.

None of them held weapons, but something told me that none of them needed to.

To my relief, my parents didn’t seem to have noticed that they were the only members of the congregation not packing heat. They were chattering

away with a tall, elegant man near the punch bowl. He had dusky skin, dark hair and wore a sharp white suit that seemed to shimmer only if I looked at it out of the corner of my eye.

“That’s Oberon,” Luke explained. “King of the Fair Folk.”

“*Really?*” I believed Luke, but that didn’t mean I wasn’t stunned. If he’d warned me that even Shakespeare characters would be showing up to watch me become a queen, I was pretty sure my inner English major would have screamed like she was backstage at an NSYNC concert. “Where’s Tatiana, then?”

“I’m not the only mythical king who has a hard time keeping hold of his woman, I’m afraid.” Luke turned me around to face him and cupped my cheeks in his hands. “But that changes today. We’ve never made it further than the coronation before, love. After I place that crown on your head, you’ll be just as strong as I am. Just as powerful. Harder to kill than ever.” Luke’s eyes glinted with certainty. “I’m not losing you again.”

Through the exhaustion and the excitement and the nerves, I couldn’t help but smile up at him.

A real smile this time. Big, whole, and bright.

Luke bent down to kiss my lips. Even as our mouths moved against each other, my smile didn’t fade.

“And I look okay?” When the kiss broke, I took my skirt in my hands and swished it for him. “Not too much?”

My hair was huge and perfectly curled, like I was some kind of Disney princess. Eglantine roses were threaded through the curls, secured by their downward sloping thorns.

I wore the red lipstick that was starting to feel like my signature, a little mascara, some eyeliner, and a flowy white ballgown that put my wedding dress to shame.

Luke had insisted on that: today, I had to wear white.

“It’s the wedding dress you always deserved.” Luke placed his hands around my waist and drew me back toward him. At his touch, the elated fluttering in my stomach grew. “Our first wedding might have been a little sudden and rushed. But when I place that crown on your head, you should know I’ll be renewing my vows under my breath—and tonight, I’ll be taking my time.”

I could feel my eyes sparkle at his words.

If he was renewing his tonight, then I’d renew mine as well.

“You look exquisite, love.” Luke kissed me a final time before he let go of my waist. “Now. I need to go do a final check of things, then light the bonfire.”

“You’re going to leave me here all on my lonesome?” I teased. “And after all that talk of protecting me...”

Luke patted the sword that hung sheathed against my hip.

“Don’t forget, love—I’ve seen you fight,” he reminded me with a smirk. “No angels around. They don’t even know we’re here. But just in case, you’re to stay here in the tent until it’s time. Eat something.” He nodded at the table behind us, laden with fruits and cheese, slices of baguette and a pitcher of sparkling juice. “Don’t think I’ve not noticed that you’ve barely been nibbling all day.”

“I’ll try,” I promised. It wouldn’t be easy. My stomach still felt queasy any time I so much as imagined the taste of food. “Just for you.”

“Good. I’ll meet you beneath the arbor when the sun begins to set.” Luke winked at me, then moved through the flap of the tent. “I love you, my queen.”

“I love you too,” I whispered back to him. My voice came out softer than I’d expected, though, and I wasn’t sure Luke had heard it.

Still, it felt good to say it.

It’d feel even better to say it while Luke and I shared that drink he’d promised me after the coronation was done tonight. After he explained to me all of his shady behavior, I’d say it to him loud and clear, while looking him right in the eyes.

Just imagining the way his smile would spread across his lips when he finally heard those words for real settled my stomach just enough that, as I turned to the table of food, I felt real, actual hunger for the first time in weeks.

Luke loved me. I loved him.

As I bit into a fat, juicy strawberry, I finally felt like maybe—just maybe—everything was going to turn out all right this time.

“God, that’s good.” It was amazing how perfect something so simple as a ripe strawberry could taste after weeks of barely eating anything at all. They were out of season, sure, but that never seemed to be a problem when it came to the resourcefulness of Hell.

When this was over, I wanted an entire bathtub full of strawberries just like this one.

I wasn't sure I wanted to eat anything else ever again.

"Enjoying yourself, Evelyn?"

I turned slowly as Raph's voice called out to me from the entrance of the tent. He wore an outfit similar to the one Luke had donned for the occasion—but where Luke wore tan slacks and a cream-colored button-down, Raph was dressed entirely in bright, almost blinding, white.

"Raph. You came." I smiled, but behind that smile, there was a little confusion.

I didn't remember ever emailing Raph the details for tonight. Had Luke done it for me?

Ugh. I supposed that was the only possible answer. I'd have to bring that up to him during our conversation tonight as well.

In the moment, it didn't matter as much as I thought it would. Not really. Luke must have invited him, and Luke hadn't made a bad call yet.

If we were counting on my own parents being accepting of my new position as Queen of Hell, surely Raph could handle the revelation as well.

"You look surprised to see me here." As Raph entered the tent, I caught a glimpse of the sun hovering over the horizon behind him. The sky was already starting to go all purple and orange and pink over the rocky cliffs that surrounded us. "And beautiful, Evelyn. Beautiful as always. Heavenly, one might say."

I swallowed and tried to force my smile a little bigger.

Not long now.

Soon, I'd be up in front of everyone with Luke at my side, wearing the crown of the Queen of Hell.

"Thank you, Raph. You look nice too." I wished he'd go sit down with the others. I knew I was a little behind on my thesis work, but this hardly seemed like the time to talk about it. "Bea is out with the others. You should go say hi. You know how she loves rubbing elbows with you literary academic types."

Plus, it would save her from further bickering with Don. I was pretty sure everyone would be grateful for that.

"I didn't come here to talk to Beatrice, Evelyn." Raph moved toward me slowly. There was strange seriousness in his eyes.

"Then...what did you come here for?" I glanced toward the flap of the tent again. The light coming through its slit was darkening quickly. Beyond it, I caught the faint scent of smoke that told me the bonfire had

been lit. I had a few minutes, then I'd need to walk down the aisle. "There's champagne outside too, you know. A good vintage. Ask any of the waiters, and they'll—"

"No." Raph closed the gap between us so quickly, it was like time had hiccupped. I blinked, and suddenly, he was standing less than a foot away.

"No?" My heart started racing, though I didn't know why. Raph liked me. He always had. Even after that awkward encounter at the staff Christmas party, he'd never punished me or tried to confront me about the way I'd turned down his advances that night.

Something was wrong, though. Something about the way his smile slowly curled across his lips.

Something in his eyes, glimmering dark and bright all at once.

"I know what you're planning on doing tonight, Evelyn."

"You do?" I highly doubted that.

"I do." Raph held out his hand to me expectantly. "I want you to know you don't have to. You're a good girl, Evelyn. You have a good heart. A kind soul. You can still be saved. *I* can still save you."

"Save me from what, exactly?" My pulse quickened to a gallop.

My gut instinct didn't lie.

Something was wrong. I looked around for an exit, but Raph stood between me and the only way out to be found. Apart from drawing my sword and slashing my way out of the tent—which I wasn't ruling out yet—I was trapped.

"From yourself. From *him*." Raph jabbed his hand out again, more urgently this time. "Put your pretty little hand in mine. Come with me. I know you want to. I can take you away from all this evil. I can save you from this sin."

"Sin?" I took a step back. My thigh bumped against the table behind me. "Raph, what are you—"

"You're not lost yet, Evelyn." Raph enunciated each word like both our lives depended on it. "You just need to make the choice to be saved."

I blinked. At my side, my fingers twitched toward the hilt of my sword.

I didn't know how he knew, but there was not a doubt in my mind that he did.

He wasn't just talking about saving me from Luke, or my marriage.

He was talking about saving me from becoming a ruler of Hell itself.

“You’re wrong, Raph.” I kept my voice measured and slow. If nothing else, it gave me a little more time to process this. Time to think. “My heart *is* good. My soul *is* kind. But I’ve already chosen—long before you came into this tent.”

“No,” Raph breathed. His brow lowered furiously. “Evelyn—”

“This is my choice.” I nodded to the tent’s exit. “I think it’s time for you to leave.”

“I’m sorry to hear that, Evelyn.” He raised a hand to my face, then frowned even deeper as I jerked my head away. “I see.”

My jaw tensed. “Glad to hear it.”

Raph shrugged, and for a moment, I thought he really would go.

But then, he raised his hand up toward me. A shining, blinding white light shot out at me from his palm.

It was a type of light I’d seen in battle before. Once, outside of a celestial strip club in Vegas. Again in that memory of my coronation in Paris.

Angelic fire.

I drew my sword so fast, the air crackled and split around its blade. Fire roared up from the hilt as I deflected Raph’s blast.

“You’re lucky I’m faster than you, Raph,” I panted as I bared my teeth at him. Rage unfurled within my chest, making the flames of the sword grow even bigger and brighter. “The treaty is still unbroken. If you hurt me, there will be Hell to pay.” I arched a brow. “Quite literally.”

“Stupid girl,” he spat, taking aim again. “Everything to come is inevitable. The breaking of that treaty included. If the adversary won’t do it, I’ll just have to take care of it myself.”

I ducked and rolled, dodging the second blast. But as I raced around Raph toward the entrance of the tent, sword in hand, he let another burst of light fly.

This one hit my shoulder blade from behind, brutally searing my flesh. It sent me tumbling out of the tent and skidding across the dirt and rocks. All of the air in my lungs was forced out through my lips upon impact.

And as I stared through the flap of the tent, face contorted with pain, I finally saw Raph for what he truly was.

Shining white wings spread out behind him as his eyes glowed intensely, filled with heavenly light.

Raph. At the sight of his wings, I finally made the connection.

No. Not Raph.

Raphael.

“It’s a shame, Evie. Such a waste.” Raph tutted at me, shaking his head as he approached. “I had such high hopes for you. If only you’d chosen correctly, I think I might have actually come to love you.” He laughed humorlessly as I raised my sword to him. With a sharp, impossibly fast movement of his foot, he kicked it out of my hand. “I could have offered you an eternity of pleasure in Paradise—and you threw it all away.”

I tried to push myself to my feet, but the burn on my shoulder sent pain screaming so intensely through my body, I almost cried out myself.

Behind me, I heard an entire army of demons rise.

I heard the hiss of swords being unsheathed and the *tch!* of guns being cocked.

As Raph lowered his palm to my temple, I heard Luke roar my name.

“Evie! No!”

After all of our careful planning, somehow things had still come to this.

I closed my eyes, ready for it.

It would break Luke’s heart all over again if I died here today. As soon as Raph fired, I knew I would, too.

That’s why I couldn’t let him.

“I’ve been to Paradise,” I growled at him, thinking of the club in Vegas where my ex-fiancé’s infidelities had set all of this into motion. “I wasn’t impressed.”

I crashed through the wall of pain and swept out my leg to knock Raph off his feet. He hit the ground hard, scrambling to his knees as I sent a blast of fire searing toward him—

And missed.

From behind me, a bright blur zoomed toward Raph, knocking him away.

No. Not from behind me.

From *above*.

“Poor, pathetic Raphael.” The angel’s wings folded against his back. He cooed the words as he positioned his knee over Raph’s throat. “Not so good at following orders, are you? I thought I told you to stay away—and yet, here you are.” The angel chuckled. “Just couldn’t help yourself.”

“Gabriel?” I recognized this one, I was surprised to discover. He’d fought Luke outside of Paradise in Vegas once, trying to kill me.

Before that, he’d been one of my ex’s groomsmen. I hadn’t liked him any more back then than I did now.

But between then and now, something had changed.

Not for me, but for him.

Now, here he was, saving my life.

“Why...?” My mouth tried to form a question, but there were too many for me to possibly choose from.

Why are you here? Why did you do that? Why did you save me?

“Don’t look so confused, Evelyn.” A hand gripped my shoulder from behind. A golden coolness flowed through it. When the sensation passed, the pain was gone.

I turned to find Michael standing behind me. Another of Adam’s angelic would-be groomsmen. The one who called all the shots.

“Shouldn’t I be?” I spotted Luke over Michael’s shoulder. I expected him to look furious at the presence of these angels, or at least as uncertain about all of this as I was—but the look on his face was impossible to read.

A dash of sorrow. A splash of anger.

And beneath that—something else.

Acceptance, maybe.

Maybe surrender.

It wasn’t a look that was right on Luke’s face at all.

“Don’t worry,” Michael instructed me as he helped me to my feet. On the ground a little way away, Raph thrashed and twisted frantically under Gabriel’s knee. Gabriel didn’t budge. “We’re here to help.”

“Why?” I spat the question at him.

It didn’t make sense.

None of this made sense.

Michael laughed. The sound was hollow, echoing and cold.

“I’m sure you’ve heard the expression before.” He took me by my shoulders and turned me back toward Luke. His lips lowered to my ear, whispering. “*The Lord works in mysterious ways.*”

LUKE

“Go ahead.” Michael gave me a nod. My hands were raised over Evie’s golden hair. I held the crown between them. Its dripping rubies and black diamonds glittered sinisterly in the light of the bonfire at our backs. “Put it on her. We won’t stop you.”

“Don’t!” Raphael roared from the edge of the fire. He jerked and twisted, desperately trying to break free of Gabriel’s grasp. “Kill her! Kill her now and let this be done!”

“Quiet, you.” Gabriel only thumped Raphael on the back of his head with a rough fist for his efforts. “You’ve already ruined this enough as-is. If you wanted her dead, you should have done it in one shot.”

“Leave him be, Gabriel.” Michael scoffed. “The treaty has been broken for months now. Which the adversary is well aware of.”

“What?” Evie raised her eyes to me. In them, I saw confusion. Betrayal, as well.

“That first morning, when you tried to leave the Inferno.” In my voice, there was the sound of an apology that I still hadn’t figured out how to make. Biggest mistake of my life. One that I would atone for soon—and painfully, too. “I ordered you to stop. I abused my vows to keep you in Hell against your will.”

Michael and I could have argued over the technicalities of whether or not that truly breached the treaty for decades. We nearly had.

But then Michael had pointed it out to me: any way that we tried to test our theories would put Evie's life at risk.

Whether I was right or wrong, it wasn't a risk I'd been willing to take.

"But..." Tears formed in Evie's eyes. "Then why aren't they trying to kill me now?"

I moved my thumbs across the crown I still held over her head and sighed.

"I'll explain it all in a moment," I promised. "First, let's get you crowned."

"Before we change our minds," said Michael, admiring his nails.

The other Fallen all looked furious. Evie didn't know enough of the angels to work out the deal I'd made yet, but the Fallen certainly did.

They would have to get over it.

I hadn't made the deal with them in mind. Soon, their opinions wouldn't be my problem at all anymore.

Soon, I'd have new problems to contend with.

Problems I would be facing all on my own.

Evie glared at me with the purest hatred I'd ever seen glinting in the lovely grays of her eyes but bowed her head all the same.

It almost made me smile.

For a woman so small and delicate, she was so brilliantly full of rage. Well-deserved, too.

She'd never forgive me. She didn't have to.

It would make her the finest queen Hell had ever known.

The crown glowed gently golden as I placed it onto Evie's head. It settled around her hair exquisitely. A perfect fit.

"That feels..." Evie shuddered and swallowed uncomfortably. "I don't know how that feels."

"Hellish, I imagine." I took her chin between my fingers and turned her face up toward mine. "But we're not quite done yet."

"We're not?"

"No." I ran my thumb over her lower lip. "To complete the coronation, we'll need to seal it. With a kiss."

She frowned. "I don't know that I want to kiss you right now, Luke. Tell me what's going on. What have you done?"

"Soon, love." My lips found hers. Her mouth was tense against mine for a moment, but I knew she could feel the love I held for her in that kiss.

And one way or another—even in the darkest hours—love always won out in the end.

Even if it took a thousand lifetimes to get there.

I believed it. I had to.

If I didn't, all of this was for naught.

Evie's tongue slipped against mine greedily. I could feel my power flooding into her. It made her needy. Desperate for more. It curled its tendrils around her heart. Her mind. Her soul.

We both burst into flames as our hands frantically sought out each other's bodies. We clung to each other in the center of the fire, hot enough to melt steel—but the only thing that burned was our desire.

This fire couldn't hurt me.

Now, it couldn't hurt her, either.

These flames were something that was all our own.

As we parted, the flames faded away slowly. They retreated into our irises. Evie's grays flickered, full of so many delicious things I only wished I had the rest of eternity to enjoy.

Lust among them—which I would be sure to tend to before all this was done.

"So beautiful." Michael clapped his hands together slowly in a sarcastic round of applause. "Congratulations. After so many failures, you've finally succeeded. Well done."

"No!" Raphael roared, his face twisted in fury.

This time, Gabriel didn't chastise him. He simply thumped Raphael hard enough on the back of the head to send his body slumping to the ground, knocked out cold.

"I do apologize for our colleague's lack of manners." Michael sneered in Raphael's direction. "Needless to say, he was acting alone and will be dealt with accordingly."

"You should muzzle your dogs better, Michael," I growled at him. "He could have killed her."

"And so could I. I've had a million opportunities, you know." Michael shrugged. "I still could, I suppose."

"You wouldn't dare." I reached for the dagger of cursed iron at my belt and imagined sinking it into Michael's eye. A consolation prize—but not one I would have enjoyed nearly as much as I wanted to. "Our deal, Michael."

“I know, I know.” Michael held his hands up innocently. “It really is dangerous for her up here on Earth. Maybe you should keep *your* bitch on a shorter leash.”

I reached for my dagger, but somehow, it wasn't there anymore.

I glanced over at Evie, who had moved with the swiftness of Hell itself.

She'd taken the dagger from my sheath in the process.

Now, she had it positioned against Michael's throat.

“I want answers.” Evie turned the dagger toward me. There was the devil in her eyes still, an inferno of all her own. “And I don't care what I have to do to get them. Start talking.”

In the crowd, I heard Evie's mother gasp. Her father, on the other hand, made a small noise of approval. True to their word, even after all they'd seen today, they were taking all of this surprisingly well.

I was inclined to agree with Evie's father for once.

Her part of our agreement had been fulfilled.

Now, she deserved to know about the other I'd made behind her back.

“That night after your grand victory in Might,” I explained. “I went up to the rooftop. Michael met me there.”

“A little birdy I had working on Heaven's behalf inside the Inferno told me about Lucifer's little slip-up the morning after your wedding.” Michael smiled serenely. “A canary in your coal mine, if you will. It was a technicality, yes, but one I was certain we could all use to settle this once and for all.”

“The angels claim they don't want war. I know you feel the same.” Evie's father had been a veteran, I knew. And she knew if she was killed again, I would have no choice but to throw the Earth into yet another bloody decade of strife. It was a small consolation. An offering. One that I hoped she'd come to appreciate in time. “We came to an agreement. One that would allow us to both get what we wanted.”

“Which is?” Evie shifted the dagger to point to Michael, then back to me again. “Say more.”

I had to fight back a smile. A little tear, as well.

She really was something indescribably perfect. Only just crowned queen, and already she was threatening both the most powerful of Heaven's angels and the Devil himself.

“I wanted you to live. Forever. I wanted to ensure that you would never be slain again,” I said simply.

But she already knew that.

“And you?” She turned the dagger on Michael again.

He chuckled. “Only to set things right. I don’t enjoy this endless cycle of reincarnation, my dear. It’s messy. It takes up so much energy, so much *time*. Best for it all to come to an end with all things perfectly returned to their rightful places. Doesn’t that sound nice?”

“Coming from your mouth? Fuck no.” She turned the dagger back to me. “What’s he rambling about?”

I didn’t have the heart to remind her that the dagger was made of cursed iron, not blessed. It wouldn’t hurt me, even if she did try to slit my throat with it.

But this was how I wanted to remember her. Fierce, furious, full of spit and vinegar and flame.

“You won’t be reincarnated again,” I explained. “You won’t be able to—because before we leave here tonight, you won’t be capable of being killed.”

“What?” Evie drew back in disbelief. “But I’m still human. You didn’t tell me that the coronation would make me immortal, Luke.”

“You’re still human, yes. But only for now.” Michael smiled down at the dagger like it amused him as she wheeled it back around in his direction. “You make a fine Queen of Hell, Evelyn. It’s simply a shame that you’ll be serving the denizens of your domain all on your own.”

“No.” Evie said it with frustration, like she was arguing with a drunk man at a bar. “Luke and I will rule together. King and queen.” She kept the dagger pointed at Michael but turned her gaze on me. “Won’t we?”

There was pleading in her eyes. It broke my heart in a way it had never been broken before.

In some part of her, however small, she already knew.

I reached into the pocket of my trousers and withdrew that which had been agreed upon. As I held my fist out to Michael, he accepted three nails into his palm, dropped one by one.

“The Triclavia,” I said. “As promised.”

“Someone explain this to me.” Evie looked at me a little helplessly. “Luke, what’s going on?”

“They’re holy nails,” I told her tonelessly. “Charged with the power of millions of believers who think they were used to secure the son of God to a cross. There are many of them out there in the world, stored in the Vatican and hidden away in monasteries, but these three are the ones that siphon off all the energy of that belief.”

Were they real? That, I didn’t know. But the power they held was, and that was all that mattered.

Belief was a powerful thing. People would fight for it. Kill for it. Die for it.

Same as love.

“We’ve been searching for them for so long, I never thought we’d find them.” Michael tucked them into his own pocket, sounding pleased with himself. “You Infernal creatures hid them well.”

“Too well,” I grumbled. My eyes found Evie’s. “That’s what I’ve been away doing. Tracking them down. The Earth has changed since they were stolen and stashed away. Their hiding places were covered by water, buried by sand. They weren’t easy to find again.”

But I had—and I’d paid for it dearly.

I should have spent my last weeks with Evie making her feel more loved than she’d ever felt in all her life.

Instead, I’d all but abandoned her, and made her paranoid on top of it as she desperately tried to uncover my secrets herself.

“That’s it, then.” Evie blinked and lowered the dagger, stunned. “My life for some nails. God.”

“Careful,” Michael warned her. “I wouldn’t be uttering His name quite yet.” He clapped his hands together and turned to me with a grin. “Shall we proceed with the other half of our deal?”

I nodded.

Might as well get on with it.

The sooner I did, the sooner she was safe.

“Luke?” Evie’s lashes fluttered as she sought answers from my face.

“I’m sorry.” It was all I knew to say.

Explaining it would only make it hurt all the more.

For both of us.

Better that I shouldered the brunt of the pain alone to start.

“On your knees, good Christian.” Michael smirked at his own joke.

Fucking angels. They were lucky it wasn’t a sin to be so damn smug.

“Luke...” Evie shook her head in disbelief as I sank to my knees.
“Luke!”

My eyes never left hers.

“I swore to you, Evie, that I would never let them kill you again.” I licked my lips as Michael drew a dagger of his own. This one, unlike the one Evie held, could harm me as much as it liked. Every pain imaginable short of death itself. “I may be the Devil, but the Devil keeps his word.”

“Too true.” Michael hummed with agreement as he positioned the dagger against the back of my shirt. He cut it open in a single flick of his wrist.

“Don’t you dare!” Evie dove toward Michael with my dagger, but Gabriel appeared behind her before the blade could find a home in Michael’s chest.

“Let it happen,” he murmured as she thrashed and kicked. “It will all be over soon enough.”

Evie looked to the Fallen as Michael lowered his dagger to one of the scars on my back. “Help! Please! You *have* to help!”

They only stared at her blankly, unmoved.

They knew better than to try and stop this.

A deal was a deal. Even to fallen angels—once an agreement was sealed, it was done.

“This will hurt,” Michael warned me. He sounded thrilled.

“Mal! Don! Legion!” Evie looked to each of our allies. I didn’t know how they reacted. I couldn’t risk taking my eyes off her. Not now. I only knew that they didn’t rise to her call.

Michael pierced my scar with the tip of the dagger. My wings unfurled in an instant, black and broad.

I’d loved these wings. They’d been a small joy, a replacement for the phantom pains I’d felt after losing my first pair.

But they were a worthy sacrifice.

I loved Evie more.

“The Fourth!” Evie cried out to Azrael, who still watched silent as ever with his other riders. I’d known the moment they arrived today that all Michael and I had agreed upon would take place as planned.

I didn’t know how soon they would make their great ride across the Earth.

I only knew that when they did, Evie would still be in Hell. Safe and sound in Pandemonium, preparing for the war without end that would follow.

“J-Joan.” Evie’s voice broke as the tears fell from her eyes. Such lovely eyes. The color of a morning after a great storm. Ashes scattered across virgin snow. The petals of Silver Ghost Eryngium, the buds of cotton lavender. The sea she loved so much, reflecting the sky on a cloudy day. “Bea... Ava—Ava, please!”

“You shouldn’t beg, my dear. It simply doesn’t become you.” Michael tutted and shook his knife at her. “Quiet now. I don’t want your racket to drown out his screams.”

I clenched my jaw as Michael made the first cut. Pain erupted at the point of contact. I focused on Evie’s perfect face, so contorted with pain of her own, until my eyes went blurry with the ravages of agony. It wracked my body until I couldn’t help but roar with it.

I threw my head back and let my throat tear itself open, directing my fury up toward Heaven itself.

It ended so suddenly that I didn’t realize I wasn’t screaming anymore until I heard myself panting instead. I was slumped forward on my hands and knees. My black blood tricked down my arms, soaking into the gravel and dirt where my palms were pressed.

It ran freely, until it wasn’t black at all anymore. The color turned silvery, then pearl-like, then opalescent.

“Luke!” Evie’s breath was sharp and shuddering as Gabriel finally released her. She threw herself to her knees on the ground in front of me. Her hands smoothed against my skin, so beautifully warm in a way I knew I would never be warm again.

My blood was cold. My skin was cold. My soul...cold.

But Evie’s hands on my cheeks were warm enough, I could’ve suffered through the emptiness of the End itself just for that small, simple blessing.

I cherished it.

One last chance to feel her heat, the heat I knew meant that all of this was worth it.

One last inferno. The one that burned inside her now.

Kissed by the flames of our love, one last time.

“Luke, you’re so cold.” Evie’s pupils were pinpricks. Her irises burned so brightly now, the grays were overwhelmed by the reds and golds of her

fire. “You’re so cold—and I’m so...so warm.”

“Good.” I forced my lips into a smile that hurt almost as much as losing my wings again. “Always...only ever wanted to keep you warm.”

“Why, Luke? What’s happening to you?” She pulled my face towards hers with desperation. “What’s happening to *me*?”

“We’re changing, love,” I rasped. “Don’t fight it. It’s...” I hissed as a searing formed across my back. Not fire this time. *Ice*. “It’s easier if you just take it in stride.”

“I’m burning up, Luke.” God, it hurt to hear the pain in her voice. Mine had returned as well. A shared agony. A shared experience. One of our last. “My whole body feels like a furnace. And my back—”

She heaved forward as the pain overtook her. I caught her in my arms before she could hit the ground.

“Shh.” My body was shaking. So was hers. We trembled together, like two trees in the midst of a bloody hurricane. “It’s all right. It will pass. It’s going to be all right.”

“I’m so *angry*, Luke!” She was sobbing now. Her tears burned like molten lava as they slid against my cheek, her face pressed to mine. “I’m so fucking full of...of *rage*—”

“I know, love.” I smoothed her hair down over the delicate curve of her scalp. “I know.”

I did know. It was the first pain I’d ever felt. I hated myself for putting her through it.

I hated it even more that in the place of that same rage, the fury that I had clung to for so long, something else had taken root in my soul instead.

Love. Endless, relentless love. The pure, unbridled adoration that a priest had for his God. That a shepherd had for his flock.

But I only worshiped at one alter—hers.

This mind-whirling love I held now, I held for her and her alone.

We burst together, simultaneously. Twin sets of wings sprang from our backs in an explosion of feathers and flame and brilliant, blinding light.

Hers were as dark and glossy as the ones that Michael now held in his hands.

Mine were a shining, a celestial white.

“There.” Michael almost purred as he moved to the bonfire and tossed my severed wings inside. “Everything in its place. Lucifer, ready to return to Heaven. Lilith, banished forever to Hell.”

“Luke.” Evie’s tears wouldn’t stop falling. With all that rage inside her, I knew she must have hated me more than she’d ever hated anything in all her life—and yet, she clung to me still. “Luke, what have you done?”

“Only what was necessary,” Michael assured her. As he approached us again, he brushed his hands together. Wiping them clean. “He saved your life, my dear. Or damned it. I’m not really sure what the proper semantics are, to be honest. But I do love a good redemption arc, don’t you?”

“Luke.” Evie pulled back. Her gaze bored into mine. “Please.”

“You’re Infernal now, love.” My voice was shaky, but the pain was easing away. “The ruler of Hell must be Infernal, and you are the sole ruler of Hell now.”

“You turned me.” Evie gasped the words. She reached around her back, trembling as she ran her fingers over the base of her wings. “You made me into what you are.”

“What I was.”

“You...” Evie looked at me like I had just driven a dagger into her back as well. “You *bastard!*”

I tore my gaze away from hers. It hurt too much to see the fear in her eyes. The pain.

“I am a bastard, Evie,” I agreed. “I warned you of that from the start.”

“Such sweet nothings.” Michael clapped his hands and nodded. “Up you get, Lucifer. We have heavenly business to attend to, now that you’re Exalted once more.”

“No.” I snarled the word at him. Maybe there was still some hate left in my heart after all. “First, I get her safely to Pandemonium. She won’t be able to fly on her own yet. She’ll need my wings.”

“She’ll figure it out.” Michael gave Evie a sneer of disgust. “This wasn’t part of our deal. Say your goodbyes.”

“She’s still my wife.” I took hold of that hate in my soul. Clung to it as I met his eyes. “Our union is still sacred. We said our vows before the Almighty Himself.”

“Hmm.” Michael stroked his chin, considering it.

“You owe me this, Archangel.” This time, when my voice shook, it shook with a delicious rage. “You’ll get your pound of flesh. But first—”

Michael snorted. “You want to get yours. Fine.” He waved his hand at us in dismissal. “Go. I’ll see you in Paradise when you’re done.”

I looked to Evie. To her tear-streaked face. To her lipstick, smeared across her cheek like blood.

“Take my hand, love.” I held it out to her. A final hope.

If I could only have one thing more, it’d be a proper goodbye.

“No.” There was only hate for me in her eyes.

I took it in stride.

“Please.” It didn’t befit the Devil to beg, but I was no Devil. Not anymore. “Please, love. This is our only chance. After this... you won’t be able to come to Heaven. I can’t come to Hell.”

“Good,” she spat. “I don’t want you there. Not after what you’ve done.”

“Please, love.” I took her hand in mine and held tight, even when she tried to pull it away. Her wedding ring scraped against my skin, scratching deep, but still, I held on. “Please. Don’t deny me this.”

Whatever time I had just bought us would be our last. Forever.

Until the end of time.

She raised her head and looked to the crowd. Her breasts heaved beneath the white dress she still wore.

As she looked out at the faces of her friends, her parents, and the demons who would now call her queen, I watched that dress turn black as the blood that had once flowed through my veins.

The same blood that now flowed through hers instead.

“Will they be safe?” she asked Michael.

He nodded. “There’s no point in hurting them. Not now, at least. We’re not *demons*, Evelyn.” He chuckled. “Only you are.”

“Promise me,” she growled at him.

He gave her a curt nod. “Cross my heart.”

“Evie...” My hand was still outstretched. If she refused me now—if she wouldn’t take it—then that would be end for us.

No final kiss. No last embrace.

Just like that, a love that I had stirred in her across a thousand lifetimes would finally die in her, right here among these cursed rocks in the dirt.

Her lips were still shaking as she glanced down at my hand, then met my eyes.

“Do you ever feel like you’ve been cheated?” she asked me, her voice so small and heartbroken that mine broke all over again along with it.

I nodded.

I knew exactly what she meant.

Only then did she place her hand in mine.

I took her to my chest, wrapped my arms around her tight, and thanked the Almighty that she would grant me this last request.

We'd been cheated all right. Out of a life together. Out of a love that had endured since the beginning itself. Out of a family, children, so many beautiful memories that now, we would never be able to create.

We'd been cheated.

But they couldn't cheat us out of this.

The chance to say goodbye.

One last time.

EVIE

Luke flew me straight to Hell, and the whole way there, I cried. “It’s all yours now, love.” Luke wasn’t trying to be reassuring. I suspected he knew that at this point, nothing he said would have the power for that. “Your kingdom. Your domain.”

“I don’t fucking want it.” The only thing that tempered my tears now was that black, all-consuming rage that churned in my stomach and burned in my chest. “I never wanted any of it, Luke. Only you.”

“That’s kind of you to say, love.”

“Fuck you,” I spat back at him. It wasn’t kindness. It was just... *truth*.

“That’s what I’m hoping for,” he said grimly.

Then, the bastard had the audacity to glance down at me with a *smirk*.

A sad, mournful smirk. A smirk that contained a million apologies and an infinite pain—but still, a smirk.

If I didn’t have to cling to his neck to stop from falling to the ground, my newly formed wings fluttering uselessly in my wake, I would have smacked it right off his gorgeous face.

“I told you I’d kill you if you let yourself get hurt trying to save me again,” I reminded him. “And now—”

“Thanks to me, you’ll be able to make a much better go of it.” His wings flapped above us as Pandemonium came into our sights. I caught the hint of smoke coming up off them—and the phantom of a grimace in Luke’s lips immediately after.

“You’re burning, Luke.” Demons burned in Heaven. Angels burned in Hell. Even now, he was letting himself come to harm for me.

Always, *always* for me.

And for that, I hated him all the more.

“That’s Hell for you.” I didn’t understand how he could still be so flippant. I guessed no matter what color his wings were, he was still Luke. “Lovely scenery, if you’re into paintings on the sides of vans with shag carpet—but it *is* perpetually aflame.”

“How long do we have before you self-immolate?”

“Long enough.” A growl rumbled through Luke’s throat as one of his feathers burst and shriveled into embers.

“You’ll be in agony if you stay here, Luke.” No matter how much I hated him for this, I still didn’t like seeing him hurt.

“I’ll be in agony in Heaven too, love. What’s important is that you’re safe. I can stand my pain. Can’t stand yours.”

“And if I’m in agony here too?” I would be. I already knew it. Luke had sacrificed himself to save my life and now, I’d never see him again.

Never hold him. Never kiss him. Never swim in the sea together. Never see Valhalla.

I’d never give him a child.

“Well, I can think of one way to make it slightly more bearable.”

“Luke,” I warned him as he landed us on Pandemonium’s balcony.

Another smirk. This time, I nearly did smack him for it.

“Pleasurable, even,” he added—then caught my wrist before my hand could make contact with his cheek.

“What if I don’t want you?” I said the words like I meant them, but Luke had already leveraged his hold on my wrist to march me backwards, in though the balcony’s doors.

And I let him.

If there was room for one thing other than rage inside me right now, unfortunately, it was lust.

“Could take you anyway.” He said it like a threat, but to believe it, I would’ve had to ignore the way my lips parted to suck his thumb between them as he pressed it to my mouth.

I rolled my tongue around the pad of his thumb teasingly, then bit it. Luke’s eyes lit up with a terrible, perfect delight as I held him there between my teeth.

I tilted my head back, letting his thumb slide back down to my lower lip. Freed.

“You’re not the Devil anymore, Luke.” A challenge. My words sounded like *fuck you*, but my eyes said *take me*. A secret language between us. One that only we knew. “Forcing yourself on an innocent woman wouldn’t be very angelic of you.”

“And yet, here I am.” He took my throat in his hand, marching me back again until the edge of the bed hit the backs of my thighs. “You might be the Devil yourself, now. If so, maybe you deserve it.”

“If I’ve learned anything from today, none of us get what we deserve.”

There it was. The crack in my armor.

It begged the question—what did Luke and I deserve?

A life together. A proper one, lived without fear. We deserved the chance to pick out a bad pattern for our good china. To celebrate our first anniversary—paper. I would’ve made him origami cranes for wishing on. He would’ve piled cash in my lap until we gave up and started fucking on it.

All gone now.

All gone for good.

This was all we had left.

“None of us get what we deserve.” Luke repeated my words in agreement as he curled his fingers beneath the neckline of my gown. His knuckles pressed into the swells of my breasts as he tore the bodice apart with a single, sharp jerk. “An injustice so great, I’ll just have to take you instead.”

“I hate you,” I snarled at him as he pushed me back onto the bed. Should I have said it? Once, I might’ve hesitated. But now, I had the Devil inside me. I was the Devil.

Luke’s fingers tore the rest of my dress away with ease, skirts and all.

“Good,” he said, eyes narrowing sinisterly. “You can scream that so all of Hell can hear it when I make you come.”

Yes. The flush of rage and sin and hope and desire that coursed through me as Luke’s lips descended on my breasts confirmed it.

I had the Devil inside me, and I was about to have an angel in me as well.

His teeth sank into the flesh of my breast as he tore away my bra. I hissed with pain, drew my hand back and slapped him for it.

In the next instant, he had both of my wrists in one of his hands, pinned up behind my head.

“Fight me all you want, you perfect, hot-cunted little minx.” He forced his free hand between my thighs and shoved my panties aside. His fingers—two of them, long and thick—pressed into me before I had time to squeeze my knees shut. He didn’t give me a chance to deny him. He wouldn’t dream of it. Not now. “I’m not going to waste time arguing with a fucking she-demon when I could be fucking my wife instead.”

He moved my body with a thrust of his fingers into my cunt and a jerk of his hand at my wrist. I gasped and thrashed and moaned in response. My vision went white with pleasure, then pink, then red.

Fight him, the devil inside me snarled.

It only took a few more pumps of Luke’s fingers to change that devil’s mind.

Now, it only purred, *More*.

“That’s right. You like that, don’t you? Can’t fucking help yourself.” Luke slipped his fingers from my folds, sucked them into his mouth, then pressed them to my own lips.

The urge to bite him again was quickly overwhelmed by the urge to suck. To give pleasure. To feel it in return.

I locked my gaze on his as he let go of my wrists. I wound my fingers around his wrist instead, sucking and licking my honey from his knuckles like it might as well have been his cock.

I did it until I saw his chest shudder and his eyes roll back. Only then was I satisfied—for a whole second, at least.

Not enough, said the devil inside me, and I couldn’t have agreed more.

“Now who fucking likes that?” My voice was a silken purr. Bratty, almost, but too adult and refined for that.

Like the voice of a very evil woman who was all too eager to be punished for her sins.

“Too fucking long I’ve been threatening to tie you down without making good on it.” He stole his fingers from my lips, unfastened his belt, and whipped it from its loops. He looped it around my wrists and lashed it tight, keeping hold of the stray end like a leash. “How will you slap me now, love? How will you stop me from doing what I need to do?”

I smiled up at him sweetly, fluttered my eyelashes twice, then brought my foot up to kick him in the chin.

He laughed darkly as he caught my leg by the ankle. When he brought it to his mouth, he sank his teeth into the ball of my foot until I hissed.

“I’d tie these pretty ankles together too,” he warned me. “Only, it would make it far more difficult to force myself between them.”

“Wouldn’t want that,” I purred in agreement.

Luke smirked down at me again. “Oh, love. I don’t give a fuck about what you want.” He shook his head slowly, then descended onto my body with his mouth. “Not tonight.”

We’d never fucked like this before. I supposed we never would again. It was dark. Dangerous. Perfectly satanic.

The devil-turned-angel and the woman who would replace him on his throne. It was simultaneously completely foreign to me, and so perfectly natural that it was impossible not to give into it.

I hated him.

I loved him.

I wanted him inside me.

I wanted him dead.

The rage, the hurt, the heartache—it all blended together into something so exquisitely, deliciously terrible that by the time Luke’s lips trailed down to the golden curls over my cunt, my pussy was gushing for him. Honey poured from between my folds as he parted them with his tongue.

I was wet for him. I was eager.

I could tell him no and he would take me anyway.

That only made my cunt soak and burn and throb all the more.

Was it proper? Correct? Polite? Fuck, no.

None of this was.

None of it ever would be again.

If this was our last time, we’d make it one to remember.

We had to make it count.

This night had to be one we could never forget.

Luke nipped at my clit, then pinned it down beneath his tongue. His thumb slipped down my slit beneath it, plunging inside me until it was coated in my honey...then trailing lower still.

I gasped as he pressed to the tight pucker of my ass. That only made him laugh.

“Do you like it up the ass, love?” He licked my clit performatively, then rested his chin on my mons pubis so I could see him smirk. “I don’t think we ever had a chance to find out. Such a shame.”

“I thought you didn’t care what I liked,” I snapped back at him. “Losing your nerve, Luke? Maybe you’ll make a perfect angel after all.”

“I said I didn’t care what you wanted, love.” His accent, that working class English that always thrummed like the churn of a steel mill and made my skin prickle with excitement, sounded even more delicious to me now. “As for you what you like—I suppose we’ll find out.”

He pressed his thumb into my ass mercilessly. It was coated so well with my honey, it slipped right in.

Fireworks shot off behind my eyes immediately. They regrouped and doubled explosively as Luke took my clit between his lips again.

He worked his thumb in and out of my ass with aching precision. With every moment, purred and hissed and moaned. He pinned my clit between his teeth, sucking and releasing rapidly. My pussy throbbed in time with the movements of his lips. With his tongue, he teased it until I wondered if he was trying to drive me mad.

Maybe so.

Better to lose my mind than to lose him.

The orgasm hit me before that thought could make me cry. It was only then that I realized what Luke was really doing.

This wasn’t some sort of last-hurrah kink session. It was real, and it was dark, and it was fucking evil—but as much as it was meant to make me remember, it was also meant to make me forget.

For as long as he could keep me focused on the terrible, perfect things he could do to my body when he wasn’t holding back, I wouldn’t be focused on the world-shattering loss I would feel when he was finally gone.

Like he sensed that I’d caught onto his clever ruse, Luke slipped his thumb from my hole and released my clit. It still twitched and throbbed in his absence, desperate to feel his mouth again.

“Greedy cunt,” he growled down at me. He sucked his thumb into his mouth, then tore at the fastenings of his slacks. “Did you really think I’d just let you lie there and luxuriate in orgasm after orgasm?”

“I think you know if you take anything more from me, I’ll make you pay for it.” Part of me probably meant that.

The other part of me knew that right now, Luke needed to forget too.

Luke was out of his pants in an instant. His hand moved to my throat again. He moved his face so close to mine, the tips of our noses pressed into each other's cheeks.

"Bite me and I'll find an exciting new use for my belt," he purred. "I know how much you like being spanked."

He took the loose end of his belt in his fist again. With his other hand, he grabbed his cock.

Fuck. Luke had always had a gorgeous cock, but now, it looked better than ever. Thicker. Harder. Longer. Was that even possible?

Maybe.

God help me if Luke's angelic dick was actually bigger than his satanic one.

Luke stroked his cock in his fist as he guided it to my lips.

"Suck it good and I'll give you a treat, love."

I opened my mouth to say something pithy back to him, but Luke didn't give me a chance.

He forced the tip of his cock between my lips before I could speak.

His precum slicked across my tongue, salty and sweet all at once. I couldn't help myself. I was ravenous for him. I swirled my tongue around his tip, licking up every drop.

As I sucked Luke deeper into my mouth, he gave me twice as much as I was ready for. That should have made me furious. Should have made me feel *used*.

And it did.

And I loved that too.

I loved it even more than I would have if he'd let me go at my own pace.

"That's it. Take it. Swallow me." His hips shifted forward brutally as he fed his cock down my throat, inch by inch. It made me gag, and that was perfect. It made me choke, and that was even better.

Every time my throat rebelled against the thickness being piped down it, my whole body convulsed. Even my cunt.

Especially my cunt.

If it'd been wet before, it was drowning now. Luke didn't miss that fact, either.

“Getting wet while you choke on cock. Incredible.” He pulled the belt taut, stretching my arms up until he was lifting the rest of my body as well. With his other hand, he plunged two fingers into my cunt again. They pumped in and out of my channel mercilessly. Another orgasm was coming, and when it hit, I knew it’d hit hard. “A perfect slut like you is well worth burning for.”

When I stared up at him, my throat contracting around his cock like it wasn’t sure if it wanted to force him out or swallow him down, I saw the smoke rising from his neck.

He really was burning for this. For me.

As he caught me staring, he gave me another brutal thrust of his hips. Hard and sharp.

My eyes narrowed as fury burst inside me again.

Good. He deserved to burn.

“Fuck, love. That pretty throat of yours is going to milk me dry.” He gave my cunt a sharp slap that made my whole body curl inward as he pulled his cock from my mouth. So close to orgasm—and damn him, he’d taken it away.

“Too good to come in my mouth now?” My voice was crueler than I’d ever heard it. *You’re going to lose him*, a broken voice called out in my head. *You’ll never taste him like this again.* It only made me grit my teeth and fight all the more to lean into my lust. My rage. “You’re pretty high and mighty for an angel who’s been stripped of his wings twice.”

Luke’s brow lowered. His gaze darkened, glinting with a rage of his own.

“And you’re pretty fucking mouthy for a woman at my mercy.” He pressed his cock against my cheek, rubbing it roughly up and down my skin. “I could come anywhere I wanted on you, and you’d have no choice but to take it. In your mouth, on your face, in your hair—” He laughed. “Oh, how you’d hate that. All that perfect hair.”

He tugged the belt up higher, lifting my torso up even more so when he crushed his lips against mine, I had no choice but to meet him halfway. His tongue lashed out against mine. When he pulled it away again, he left the taste of pears, cold honey and rain in my mouth in his wake.

I arched my back, straining for more of him as he stole his lips away again.

“That’s more like it,” he growled. “I want you so fucking desperate for me it hurts, Evie. I want you to hurt as I’ve hurt—” He dropped me back down onto the bed again and moved between my thighs. “You say you hate me. Good. I want you to. I want you to hate me more than you’ve ever hated anyone in your life.”

“Wish granted, adversary. Except—oh. We don’t call you that anymore, do we?” Yes. *Bait him. Give it back to him. Make him hate you too.*

“Say it again,” he ordered. He pressed his thumb down on my clit, rolling it so hard and so slow that I felt my soul straining to leave my body just for some semblance of release. “Say it, if you mean it. Personally, I suspect you like how I fuck you so much, you can’t quite—”

“I hate you,” I snarled at him. “I hate you, Luke. I do.”

I love you. I love you, and I will always love you, and damn you for leaving me. I’ll die if you go.

So many words I couldn’t tell him. So many broken pieces of my heart that would only cut him so badly if I tried to pick them up and piece them together again before he was gone.

“Good.” He folded his body over mine and pressed his cock to my entrance. His lips made war on mine. We fought gloriously, tongues and growls and teeth. He conquered me. He won. And as he pulled away, grinning like only the victor of a bloody battle truly could, he slammed his cock into me, striking me right at my core. “Remember that when I’m filling your womb with my cum.”

Time blurred. His hips slammed against my inner thighs hard enough to leave bruises. *Good.* I’d cherish them for as long as I could. When they faded, I’d mourn them in his place.

His cock ravaged my body. Every time he throbbed inside me, my cunt answered with a pulse of its own. A dark echo of him, just like I would be.

Lucifer in Heaven, Lilith in Hell.

“You know, Evie, I think I will come inside you.” His voice was a black whisper of silk dragging against rough, jagged stones. His fingers wound into my hair, twisting and pressing down so he could fuck me even harder. “I think I’ll come inside you, and I think I’ll leave you here, womb so full of my seed that your belly swells with my child.”

“You wouldn’t.” *He would. I wanted it. I needed it. But—* “You can’t.”

“You think that little bead of hormones in your arm will stop me?” Luke lowered his lips to my bicep and dragged his teeth against my skin. “I’ll bite it out of you. I will.”

“You won’t.”

His gaze flicked up at me as he gave me a particularly hard thrust. “Want to try me?”

My heart leapt in my chest. He smiled as I failed to answer.

“Yes. That’s right.” He took my jaw in his hand. His thumb dragged across my cheekbone in a rough caress. “Be afraid of me, love. Fear me. Hate me. Wish me dead. And all the while, remember.” He stole harsh kiss from my lips, then grinned. “I can still make you come with a single word.”

“Luke.” I panted his name. I desperately wanted to drag my nails down his back, make him feel some semblance of the ache that my cunt felt as he stretched it with his thickness and his rock-hard length. I would have. I would have scarred him if I could.

But my hands were bound.

Just as tightly and completely as I was bound to him.

“*Come*,” he ordered, so casually and cruelly I wanted to disobey just to prove that I could.

But I was still his wife, and our vows were binding, too.

Love. Cherish.

Obey.

The orgasm blinded me. My ears rang with it. My entire body thrashed and throbbed and sang. I screamed long before I realized I was screaming.

And it wasn’t enough.

“*Come*,” he ordered again, more forcefully this time.

The last orgasm hadn’t even finished, and already, another had started. My world narrowed to a pinprick. My cells pulled apart from each other, threatening to burst.

“*Come!*” he roared, so close to my face that his lips caught against mine as they snarled.

My heart exploded. My core melted down, nuclear. My soul left my body and came back for more.

I was laughing. I was crying. I was screaming his name, over and over, in a plea so desperate, I didn’t know if it meant *stop* or if it just meant *harder*.

My wrists flexed and his belt snapped in two. He threw it across the room and took me into his arms, lifting me up. To hold me, maybe—
To impale me on his cock even harder?

Definitely.

Our bodies slid against each other in a life-or-death scramble to cling and be clung to. We traded the sweat from our skin, moans, gasps, greedy kisses with no care for where they landed or how badly they bruised our lips. Our wings spread in unison, flapping slowly until we were floating above the mattress. Still fucking. There was no stopping now. Smoke from his skin engulfed us in a pale white mist—a reminder that what we were doing could never be done again.

“I love you.” “I love you.” “I love you.”

I couldn’t tell who was saying which words. Maybe all him. Maybe both of us, a call and response.

Maybe all me.

When Luke’s balls finally tensed against me, my legs wound around his waist, squeezing him tight. Holding him in.

If only I had the strength—if only he wasn’t burning here in this realm he could no longer claim—I would hold him there inside me forever.

I would never let him go again.

He let out a roar against my neck, then against my cheek, then up to the canopy above us, then against my lips in a kiss as he came. Luke’s seed rushed up into me, laid deep, shooting deeper, sinking in.

And finally, with one last orgasm—or just a culmination of so many I couldn’t count them anymore—I did what I’d wanted to do from the start.

I dug my nails into his back and marked his skin, deep enough I hoped it’d scar.

Something to remember me by.

Something to prove what we had would never really be gone.

When our bodies floated back down to the mattress again, I was crying. This time, I knew it for sure. My head was swimming with a cocktail of hormones too intense and all-consuming to make sense of.

I didn’t have to.

Luke only held me, kissed me, petted me and let me grieve the loss of him while I stayed there, safe in his arms for one final embrace.

“Don’t go.” It was a selfish thing to ask of him. I didn’t care. He’d begged the same thing of me every time I’d died in his arms, cradled

against his chest just like this.

It hadn't been fair then. It wasn't fair now.

"I love you, Evie." He didn't answer my plea. Not in the way I wanted.

The words he gave me instead were so much more important.

If he'd told me that he'd stay, we'd both know it was a lie.

I love you, though—that was the truth.

"Don't go." I whispered it up to him again, hoping beyond hope.

Luke was clever. Cunning. Sharp. He still had some trick up his sleeve. He must have.

This couldn't be the end. Not for us.

Our love was meant to be a love without end.

"I love you," he said again. He kissed my lips in every way he knew how. Softly. Sweetly. Cruelly. Passionately. His lips burned now. They smoked and smoldered, cracking at the edges and letting golden light through where their skin broke apart.

"Luke, I'm begging you." I curled my fingers into the back of his neck. He was shattering there, too. Smoke filled the room now. I could tell that this was hurting him. It was hurting me too, but still, I had to ask. "Please. Don't leave me. Don't go."

"I love you, darling girl." He kissed every inch of my body, moving slowly. Savoring every second, even as his body was pulled apart. "Be good for me. Be bad for me. Live your life gloriously and selfishly and in the way only you know how."

"Don't go!" My voice was desperate now. The tears stung my eyes as my heart cracked. Crumpled. Shattered irreparably into so much dust. My fingers scrambled against his neck frantically as he pulled away. "Luke, please. *Please*. Don't go. Please don't go."

He untwined my fingers from his neck and placed my hands gently down at my sides.

He kissed me again—a distraction. I closed my eyes, relishing every moment—but when his lips left mine and I opened my eyes again, he was already across the room. Naked—no time to find clothes. He'd lingered for too long already.

His body wasn't just smoking and smoldering anymore.

It was aflame.

I leapt up and raced after him. I caught his hand just before he took flight.

“Luke, please!” This was sloppy. This was cruel. This was all I could do—a single, selfish act that made it all too certain that I truly was Queen of Hell now.

He would die if he stayed, and I would die if he left.

Either way, all this sacrifice—it was for nothing at all.

“I love you, Evie.” He looked over his shoulder and gave me a final smirk, even through the flames that flickered all around him and the pain that glistened in his eyes. “When the end of days finally comes—when Heaven and Hell crumble and the Earth turns to ash and rot—I’ll still love you. And maybe, if we play our cards right—maybe then somehow I’ll find you again.”

He was gone in a flap of white wings and streak of flame that burned across the dark skies of hell like a shooting star.

Not falling this time, though.

This time, ascending.

It was only as I clutched my heart, watching him go, that I realized.

He’d told me he loved me. Over and over again, selflessly, even as I begged for the one thing he couldn’t give.

And in all my heartache and pain, I hadn’t told him I loved him back.

It was what broke me in the end. I slumped to my knees. I pounded the stone beneath me until the side of my fist was black and blue.

I cried so hard, I felt like my skull would crack and my ribs would break.

He was gone. He was gone forever, and I hadn’t told him I loved him back.

Selfish. Horrible, selfish bitch I was.

He’d done everything he could to make me hate him, but in the end, the only person I could truly hate was myself.

When the sobbing stopped, the nausea came. Below my stomach, across my hips, an aching tightness clenched so hard, it nearly brought me to tears all over again.

I threw up over the balcony. So many strawberries, gone into the pits of hell below.

There was a poetic justice to that. They were sweet things, eaten in a sweeter time. Back when everything had still felt like it could work out in my favor.

Before my entire life had been torn apart for good.

Even when the retching stopped and the bitterness of bile passed, that tightness in my lower belly remained. It rippled through me so hard, I shivered.

Maybe my period was coming on.

I was so far gone into my grief at that point, it was a thought that almost made me laugh.

Of all the unfortunate things that could happen in the most unfortunate ways, getting my period right now would be the bloody cherry atop the bloody, ruined wedding cake.

But when I felt between my legs, I only found the slickness of Luke's seed. No blood. None at all.

My heart slowly descended in my chest like an elevator into Hell itself as I wondered...

When was the last time I got my period, anyway? Last month, maybe?

...No.

Nausea set in again. Stress, maybe. It had to be.

Or maybe...

No. Surely not.

Slowly, I moved my hands up my arms, hugging myself.

Angel, devil, or otherwise, Luke couldn't have knocked me up on the spot. It just wasn't...*possible*. He'd only threatened to remove my birth control implant. He hadn't actually done it.

But then again...when was the last time I'd checked for it?

I couldn't remember the last time I'd had my period. Would I have even noticed if the implant was gone?

I probed my arm with my thumb, carefully at first, then frantically, then with desperation.

But no matter how hard I searched, I couldn't find it.

It was gone, just like my period.

Just like Luke.

And as I rode out another wave of nausea, I pressed my hand to that tightness in my stomach again.

No. Not my stomach.

In my womb.

I felt a flutter beneath my hand. Like moths around a streetlight.

Could that possibly be real? Or had I only just imagined it?

My mouth went dry as I realized.

I could ask myself as many questions as I wanted, but somehow, I already knew.

Luke was gone. Forever. For good.

But he'd left something behind, too. A gift.

A way back?

Maybe.

Or maybe Luke wasn't the one with the cards up his sleeve this time.

Maybe I was.

Today, he'd made me Queen of Hell. If the tables were turned, and Luke had been king, he would have razed Heaven itself to the ground just to get me back.

I pulled myself up on the balcony's banister and stared out across my new domain with a trembling new hope clutched against my lower abdomen, just beneath the palm of my hand.

With all of Hell at my command... I could burn kingdoms now, too.

This wasn't the end. Not by a long shot. I didn't know how yet, or even where to begin, but with the Almighty Himself and all of Hell as my witness...

I was getting my fucking husband back.

PHLEGYAS

Every nerve in my body was ringing like a bronze bell. My gloves were soaked through with sweat from my palms. More sweat beaded my brow as I pulled the gloves off.

My hands were shaking. So was my heart.

Anxiety? Probably.

Excitement? Probably some of that too.

I may have been a son of Ares, but I'd never been blessed with my father's fortitude, nor his bravery.

If I wasn't such a coward, I wouldn't have gotten myself into this mess to begin with.

"Archangel?" I approached the white-winged figure who stood on the roof of the Inferno. His skin smoked and smoldered, but if he realized it, he didn't make any show of noticing. "Is it done?"

"It is, Son of Ares." Michael didn't turn as he spoke to me. I couldn't see his face, only his wings. I wondered if this was what it was like for those humans who followed him, trying to have a conversation with their faceless god. "And all thanks to you, no less."

I bowed on instinct.

He was pleased with me, then.

But for some reason, my nerves were still ringing.

Something still felt wrong.

“You give me too much credit, Archangel.” Best to stay humble, I thought. Especially with the angels. It seemed like the kind of thing they’d be watching for up in their celestial domain. “I am merely your obedient servant. The hand that moves pieces for you that you cannot reach.”

“And so many pieces you’ve moved, Son of Ares.” One of the feathers of Michael’s wings burst into flames. Still, he took no notice. “You erased Lilith’s memories on the night after her wedding, just as ordered.”

“I did.” I bowed again. Stupid. He couldn’t see me. But it seemed like the right thing to do.

“You reported on all of Lilith’s movements in and out of the Inferno. That was very well done, Son of Ares. It allowed us to put pressure on the adversary in ways we’ve never quite managed before.”

“Thank you, Archangel.” I wished we could move past this part. I didn’t want praise. I wanted salvation.

I wanted to see my darling girl and hold her in my arms again. Nothing more.

“You did, unfortunately, slip up at one point.” Michael’s tone hadn’t changed, but a pang of fear shot through my heart anyway.

Surely he couldn’t know what I had done. How could he possibly know?

He didn’t, I decided. He was bluffing. Seeing if I would confess to something he didn’t truly know existed to begin with.

An amateur move. Especially for an Archangel.

I wasn’t falling for it.

“Did I? If I have displeased you in some way, I am sorry, but—”

“The location of the coronation. You told Raphael. You weren’t supposed to.” Michael tucked his hands behind his back as another of his feathers caught flame. “It was a poor decision, Son of Ares. In that single slip of your tongue, you could have ruined all of this for us. For you, as well.”

“I am...so sorry, Archangel.” I furrowed my brow. Of all the things he could have been cross at me for...I wasn’t actually expecting this one. “He came to me to confirm the location. I believed he was acting on your orders. I didn’t realize that angels could lie.”

“Everyone can lie. It’s the nature of the thing that matters. The reason. The results.” There was a long pause as Michael’s wings continued to

catch flame. They were burning brighter now. Did it hurt? I couldn't tell. He made no sound. "Do you lie, Son of Ares?"

"Not if I can help it." A safe answer. Hopefully the one he wanted to hear.

"Then you will be able to enter Heaven with a clear conscience. How exciting."

"Yes. Yes, it truly is." Heaven. After all this time, so many centuries of trying and failing, I'd finally found my ticket in.

All it had cost me was the soul of the Devil himself. A large price, but one that I couldn't allow myself to regret.

"I am happy for you." Michael finally turned to me. In the lapel of his suit jacket was a pale pink rose with a yellow center. He plucked it out and held it to me. "Here. A gift, to celebrate your good work and good fortune."

"Thank you, Archangel," I said slowly. Even more slowly, I approached him and took the flower. "It...is beautiful. What a lovely gift."

It would be a lovelier one to leave this place. Now, if possible.

Before the angel burned through his wings and both of us were trapped here for good.

"Do you know where it's from?"

I glanced down at it. "I'm...not sure. I was never a very good gardener, I'm afraid."

"Ask me where."

I gulped. My mouth was dry. "Ah...where is it from?"

"The Sahara, Son of Ares. Don't you find that strange?"

"From the desert?" I nodded slowly. "Yes. I agree. That's...very peculiar. So strange. How true."

"Deserts don't usually bloom, do they?" Michael wasn't blinking enough. How much was an angel supposed to blink? Surely more than that. "In an oasis, maybe, but this was found in no oasis. Or rather...the entire desert has recently *become* an oasis. All of it. Do you find that strange too?"

I nodded once. "Very...very strange. Do you know—"

"Why?" Michael shrugged. "I have thoughts. None of them yet confirmed."

"Ah. Well...it's surely a good thing, isn't it? A sign of...good things to come?"

Finally, Michael blinked. A white light enveloped the flower in my hand, turning it to ash by the time the light faded again.

“No,” Michael informed me. “Deserts aren’t supposed to be in bloom. They’re supposed to be sand. Balance on Earth has not been restored. If anything, it’s worse off than ever. Can you imagine why that might be?”

Michael’s hair was beginning to burn now. He didn’t even flinch as the fire licked against his scalp.

“Something...must still be wrong,” I guessed. Not so much of a guess though, was it? I had placed my hand on Evie’s arm, just over her implant. I had willed it to go somewhere else. So that she might have her child to love once Lucifer was gone, as I had loved mine. “Maybe something that you missed?”

Michael smiled, then. It was a horrible smile.

“That must be it. Something that I’ve missed.” Michael’s smile widened as he held out his hand to me. “Do you still wish to go to Heaven, Son of Ares?”

“Yes. Very much so.” I said it far too fast, but I didn’t care.

Too long, I’d waited. To wait any longer would be a torture I didn’t think I could bear.

I took his hand, and we were gone. Out of Hell and up into the clouds toward the gates of Heaven faster than it took for me to blink twice.

After all this time, it really was as easy as that.

“I hope whatever is *wrong* falls back into place soon,” Michael mused as his wings flapped against the fluffy dampness of the clouds. The fire that had engulfed them was gone now. Washed away by unfallen rain. “Don’t you?”

“Yes, of course.” My mind was no longer on this conversation. My mind was on her—my little girl. What color was her hair, I wondered? I tried to remember, but it had been too long. The memory, like so many others was lost to time.

Her eyes? I didn’t remember that either.

I almost laughed as I wondered if I would recognize her at all. I hoped she still remembered me—but of course, she would.

This was Heaven. Paradise. There wouldn’t be anything bad here. No sin. No pain. No regret.

“Here we are, then.” Michael continued to hold my hand. I dangled from his grip, feeling so heavy compared to the weightlessness granted to

the angel by his wings. "It's beautiful, isn't it?"

I squinted. My heart leapt as far off in the distance I spotted a set of gates. Iron inlaid with pearls.

"Yes," I breathed. "Yes, it's...it's everything I dreamed it would be."

"Good." Michael looked down on me. His smile, he seemed to have left in Hell. "I know what you did, Son of Ares. At first, I only suspected you were the source of the sin—but the moment I touched you, I saw every memory of every betrayal you've ever carried out. Now, I know for sure."

I licked my lips, feeling suddenly even heavier than before. My brain was reeling.

"I am sorry I told the angel Raphael about the coronation," I said again, trying with all my soul to show Michael my contrition. "As I told you, I was tricked—"

"No," Michael said simply. "You know that's not what I mean. Not what I mean at all."

"If you are angry with me, Archangel..." I gulped. The gates were so close now. Somehow, they'd never felt farther away. "I can make amends, of course. Whatever you like. But if you are not planning on allowing me into Heaven for my mistake—" He already knew. He'd said so himself. But I wouldn't admit it to him. I couldn't. I had done it for Evie. To give her something in exchange for all I had taken. To me, it hadn't felt like a betrayal. To me, it had only seemed like making amends. "Why bring me here at all?"

"Because," Michael said with shrug, "I needed to bring you into my domain before I could punish you."

He let go of my hand. In an instant, I was falling.

"You need a good while to think nice and hard about what you've done, Son of Ares," Michael called after me as I tumbled down, down, down. "Heaven was simply the only place that would provide a long enough drop."

As I fell, the breath was sucked from my lungs. I wondered if this was what it had been like for Lucifer when he was pushed out of heaven.

Probably not. I knew as my body spun face-down, as soon as I saw the ground rushing up towards me, I knew there was no chance that the Dawnstar been this afraid.

But then, I saw it. A flap of broad, white wings coming toward me from below.

Just the sight of it was enough to make my heart leap with a momentary hope.

Maybe another angel had taken pity on me.

Maybe Michael had changed his mind.

But that hope failed me as soon as I saw who those wings belonged to.

The Adversary. Lucifer Dawnstar.

Luke.

The very man whose soul I'd sold in exchange for my own.

I knew better than to expect mercy from him. Especially when I saw the way his face was still smoldering, fresh from what must have been his final visit to Hell.

Lucifer was many things. But merciful to those who had betrayed him?

There was no chance of that.

But as we passed each other—one falling, one ascending—I strained to find some way to force air into my lungs so I could call out to him. When that failed, I prayed to meet his gaze so he might see what I had to say in my eyes instead.

Maybe it would make whatever Michael would put him through when he got to Heaven more bearable.

Maybe it would help him forgive me for what I'd done.

But as his eyes locked on mine, I saw only my own betrayal reflected back at me.

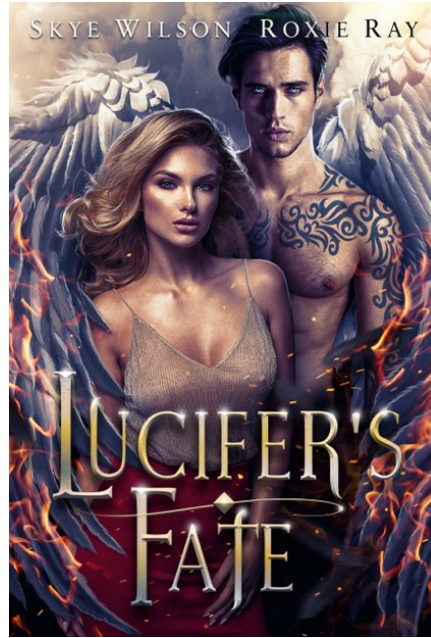
He knew it was me who'd sold him out.

What he didn't know was that he was going to be a father.

And now, he never would.



Get Lucifer's Fate



I crowned her queen and lost everything.

I gave everything to protect Evie from Heaven. And I won. Michael can torture me for eternity. But he will never touch her.

Evie is safe in Hell while I am bound in Heaven. But my queen is stronger than the angels know. I will not be left here forever, and when we are reunited, Heaven will quake.

When they learn of our child growing inside of her, they will know unimaginable fear.

A battle is coming. And if Heaven claims Hell, Evie will burn. I won't let that happen. Michael should have remembered ... no one wins against the Devil.

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LUCIFER'S FATE

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FOREWORD

*“Salimmo sù, el primo e io secondo,
Tanto ch'i' vidi de le cose belle
Che porta 'l ciel, per un pertugio tondo.
E quindi uscimmo a riveder le stelle.”*

—Dante Alighieri
Canto XXXIV, Inferno, “The Divine Comedy”

PROLOGUE

LUKE

This is it, darling girl.

This is where our great love story finally comes to an end.

For thousands of years, I've loved you. Ever since I fell from Heaven, right into your grace. Our love is only slightly younger than the creation of the birds in the sky and the fish in the sea; only marginally older than the invention of sex and sin.

We found each other at our weakest hours. You, just banished from Paradise. Me, just booted from Heaven itself.

And through the good, the bad, and everything in between—yes, we've loved. Even when it wasn't perfect. Even when it was sinful and unholy and wrong.

For a thousand lifetimes, I've stolen you, claimed you, made you my captive. My mate. My bride.

My queen.

Over and over again, you've seen me at my most possessive. My most cruel. My worst.

Now, you've finally seen me at my best.

Every time I've lost you through the ages, I've wished that it would kill me too.

Every time I've lived on without you, it's only been with the knowledge that someday, you'll come back to me again.

But this time, we both know that's not in the cards.

Through so many reincarnations of our love, you've died for it. For me.

This time, I've finally found a way to return the favor.

This time, the Almighty has blessed me with the chance to sacrifice myself so you might live for me instead.

I know I'll never see you again, Evie.

I know it's over. I can feel it in my blood, in my bones, in the channels of my heart and the roots of my soul.

But was it worth it? I know you must wonder what I would say to that now that the great battles of our tragic lives are finally done.

The answer is a thankfully simple one: *Yes*.

You bet your perfectly heart-shaped ass it was.

To live with you and love you was the greatest pleasure I've ever known.

To give my life for you was the greatest thing I've ever done.

All I can ask of you is this, love.

Cry for me, if you must.

Miss me. I like the idea of being the one who's missed, for a change.

But more importantly... Laugh for me. Read poetry that makes your heart soar and ache and break. Sing tunes you only know half the words of, just because you like how the melody feels on your tongue. Play our song on the piano and remember the way my hands felt beneath yours. Visit the ocean again. Taste the salt on the wind and let the waves lap at your feet. Stand naked in the rain; relish the chill of it on your skin. Listen to the thunder. Smell the ozone in the air. Bask in the lightning and know that you were loved.

That you *are* loved.

Forever. For eternity.

Until the stars go black, and the river of time runs dry.

Live for me, Evie.

And when you wonder, *would I do it again?*

Know that I would. In a heartbeat.

As sure as the Devil belongs in Hell.

EVIE

This was hell.

I woke up the morning after my coronation to the scent of hellfire and brimstone. Sulfur and soot. The smell of it washed over my face in a humid, panting wave.

I wanted to go back to sleep. Even if it hadn't been for the smell—which was horrible—I would have given anything to just roll over and slip back into the nothingness of unconsciousness.

If I could have done that, I could have just pretended that Luke was in bed next to me, waiting to say, “*Good morning, love. Shall I order up some brekky?*” I could have pretended that he was still here to kiss me. To hold me. To fuck me hard against the mattress and leave me exhausted all over again before the sun even peeked up over the horizon.

If I could have gone back to sleep, I would have pretended this was all just a bad, stupid dream.

Unfortunately, that option wasn't afforded to me.

I was awake—and as the smell I was breathing in got bad enough that it made my sinuses burn, I wasn't even allowed to keep my eyes shut for a little while.

Something warm and wet slicked against my cheek, forcing me to stir.

It was a tongue, I knew—but it definitely wasn't Luke's.

“What the—” I forced my eyes open and bolted upright to see what new terror had come to visit me while I'd slept.

Whatever I'd been expecting, though... it definitely hadn't been *that*.

Sitting there on my lap, panting happily with its little pink tongue hanging out of the side of its mouth, was a...

A *corgi*?

I blinked and rubbed my eyes.

Maybe I *was* dreaming.

I'd become Queen of Hell last night. I'd lost Luke. Probably forever.

I had a deep-seated suspicion that I was pregnant with his child.

But through everything that had happened...

Not once did I remember anyone mentioning that I'd adopted a chubby, stubby-legged puppy in the process.

That seemed like the kind of thing that someone should have at least given me a heads-up about, anyway.

"Okaaaay." I lifted the corgi up to eye level. Its little stumpy tail wagged happily in response. Beneath my fingers, its fur was thick and soft. "And where did you come from, little guy?"

It felt like the universe was playing some kind of idiotic joke on me.

My husband had been torn away from last night. My soulmate, gone forever. The pain of it still pounded in my chest, threatening to rip my heart into shreds and burn the pieces to ash and dust.

Luke had sacrificed everything for me. Even now, I knew, he was somewhere in the realms of Heaven—being tortured by angels for his sins, no doubt.

And in return...

Fate had sent me a *dog* as part of its condolences?

It was better than a Hallmark *Sorry for your loss* card...

But it was a far cry from making up for the fact that I'd never see my husband again.

The corgi didn't answer me, obviously. I felt stupid for even thinking it might—but then again, crazier things had happened to me in the last several months.

It just nudged my face with its wet little nose and licked my cheek again in response.

"Oh, honey." My throat was tightening all over again, just like it had last night after Luke had left me here in Pandemonium. My sinuses burned for a new reason now. Not just because this adorable puppy had the breath

of a demon—but because tears were starting to form in my eyes. “Yes. Okay. You’re... you’re very cute.”

It couldn’t bring my husband back, but I appreciated the effort.

I put the corgi back down on my lap. It walked around in two little circles, then curled up on top of my thighs and nestled its head against my hip.

Okay, it was *excessively* cute. Demon breath and all.

But as the tears rolled down my face and my chest was wracked with yet another wave of pain, I knew no amount of cuteness was going to fix this.

The only thing that could was just short of impossible.

But I had to try.

I had no choice.

I had to get Luke back.

And not just for my sake.

I placed my hand on my belly and felt for the flicker of life I’d noticed last night.

I only had to close my eyes and I could see it so perfectly in my mind. A little flame in my womb, growing stronger with every breath I took—even in the moments when I didn’t want to be breathing at all anymore.

Luke’s child. A baby boy or girl that we’d created together.

Proof that Luke’s sacrifice hadn’t been in vain.

“My queen?” Charon, clad in his usual suit and white gloves, cracked open the door to the bedroom and peeked inside. “I was wondering—oh.” His face fell into a frown. “You’re crying.”

“It’s nothing.” I wiped the tears away harder with my fist. It wasn’t nothing and I knew it. Every other beat of my heart, the loss of Luke was the only thing I *could* feel. “I’m fine. Did you need something, Charon?”

“I thought I might bring you breakfast in bed, but...” Charon’s gaze lowered to the corgi in my lap. His eyes went wide. “Is that...The *Beast*?”

“The...Beast?” I looked down at the corgi, who wiggled his wide hips as he tried to snuggle against me harder.

This mysterious corgi was many things, but a beast he certainly was *not*.

“My queen...” Charon was normally the epitome of composure, but for the first time since I’d met him, he actually looked a little bewildered.

“The Beast hasn’t been seen in... well, in a very long time. If ever. I’ve certainly never looked upon it with my own eyes, but...”

“You mean to tell me that *this* little thing is called... *The Beast*.” I blinked, feeling just as bewildered as Charon looked.

This wasn’t the conversation I expected myself having this morning.

When I’d finally cried myself to sleep last night, the only thought in my mind was how I was going to get Luke back.

But now...

This bizarre new situation seemed to have taken precedence. For some godforsaken reason.

“Here.” Charon crossed through the room and reached for the corgi. “Let me take him from you, then—”

“No, it’s fine.” I waved Charon’s hands away. “He’s fine. He can stay.”

A chubby corgi puppy didn’t even come close to making up for everything that had happened, but I couldn’t pretend like it wasn’t at least a little comforting to have something warm and furry that seemed to like me curled up in my lap.

“Ah. Very good, then. In that case...” Charon gestured to the bed. “May I sit?”

“You may...” I said slowly. The second of what I was beginning to fear might be many strange things to come out of Charon’s mouth this morning. “Is everything all right, Charon? I know I’m Queen of Hell and all now, but I’m not really sure I’m feeling up to cackling over hellfire this morning. Or torturing the sinful.” Or whatever the fuck the ruler of Hell was supposed to do.

“I’m sure everything is fine. It’s only... well, the arrival of The Beast is... unprecedented.” Charon seemed extra uncomfortable as he sat on the corner of the bed. “I think you and I might need to have a little talk.”

“About The Beast?” What a ridiculous name for a puppy. It looked like the only thing it was capable of mauling or destroying was a pair of Louboutins—at best.

“No, my queen. About... well...” Charon closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and released it. “Is it possible that you’re pregnant?”

I almost laughed.

I didn’t, but I came pretty damn close.

“I think I might be.” I let out a sigh of my own. As soon as Luke had been forced to leave me, I’d felt a stirring. The potential for a little life

inside me, making itself known. “And if I am, I’ve got an even longer day ahead of me than I expected.”

“The Beast wouldn’t be here if you weren’t,” Charon explained. “It was foretold centuries ago, but to be frank with you, my queen, we here in Hell were beginning to think it wasn’t possible.”

“For me to get pregnant?”

Charon’s eyes turned a shade sadder. “For you to survive long enough to find out whether you could get pregnant or not.”

“Well, I didn’t think it was possible for angels to steal my husband away,” I countered. “I think we might be dealing with a lot of impossible things from here on out, Charon. More than either of us know how to deal with.”

“Then how may I be of assistance, Your Majesty?” Charon placed his hand on my knee over the blankets and gave me a fatherly squeeze. “I know this all must be so much for you, and coming so fast, all at once, as well.”

“You can say that again.” I sniffed, rubbed my eyes one last time, and nodded. “But there is one thing you can do for me.” I considered it for a second, then corrected myself. “Two, actually.”

“Anything, my queen.”

“First, I’m going to need you to get in touch with...” I wracked my brain for who I should even turn to first. “Everyone, I guess. The Fallen. Mal and Don and Legion. The Fourth, if he’ll come. My friends. And my parents, too, if they’re still around.”

“Your friends and family were all given rooms in the Inferno after the...ah, the coronation, last night. I believe your friends briefed your parents on... the current situation.” I could tell that Charon was as reluctant to mention Luke’s sacrifice as I was to tell him we weren’t calling a puppy *The Beast*. “They can be summoned and brought here shortly. It will be no problem at all.”

“Good.” That was a relief. The Fallen and Luke’s other allies could help me figure out how to rescue him. As for my friends and parents... I just wanted to be close to the people I cared about most right now.

They were all I had left.

“And your other request, Your Majesty?”

“A pregnancy test,” I said. “And maybe some Gatorade. As certain as you sound about... *The Beast* being an omen of my pregnancy...” I

scratched The Beast behind his floppy little ears and felt him kick gently against my hip in response. “I’d like to be sure too. The normal, *human* kind of sure.”

Even if I wasn’t entirely human anymore. There was more fire in me now than just the little flame in my belly. I could feel it crackling and churning hot and hungry in my very soul.

“Right away.” Charon rose and gave me a low bow. “Your wish is my command.”

CHARON RETURNED an hour later with a big black gift bag. His absence had given me time to shower in my brand new royal en suite and brush my teeth. I’d meant to shave, too, but when I ran my hand over my calves, I discovered that they didn’t have hair on them anymore.

That, along with a pair of black wings on my back that seemed to have disappeared while I slept, seemed to be Luke’s coronation presents to me.

He’d become an angel all over again to keep me safe after he’d placed the crown on my head last night. In the process, he’d made me more than just Queen of Hell.

I was infernal now, too. I had control of Hell, all the power of the Devil himself... and sinfully smooth legs.

It was a nice touch, but hardly worth losing Luke over.

I would have gladly lived the rest of my life with scratchy, prickly calves if it meant I could have Luke back.

The Beast—a name I guessed I would have to keep calling him by until I came up with something better—raced across the room and yipped at Charon’s ankles as he brought me what I’d asked for.

“I hope it’s all right,” Charon said, handing me the bag. “I wasn’t sure exactly which of the tests I should buy, so...”

I shifted the tissue paper aside and almost laughed. “There are twenty different pregnancy tests in this bag, Charon.” And three different flavors of Gatorade, for that matter.

He gave me a sad smile. “I bought every one I could find. Just in case.”

“Well... thank you.” I cracked open one of the bottles of Gatorade and took a swig of purple liquid. It was pleasantly cold and fruity against my parched tongue... but I almost felt bad for even enjoying it.

How could I enjoy anything now, knowing that somewhere in the realm of the angels, Luke was almost certainly being put through the greatest

pain of his life?

"I'm just sorry I took so long," said Charon. "We're a little understaffed today, unfortunately."

"Are we?" Staffing issues were another thing I hadn't planned on dealing with this morning. We were in Hell, after all. Where else did the staff have to go? "Who's missing?"

"Phlegyas," Charon said solemnly. "He hasn't been seen since before the coronation."

"Oh." As if my heart needed to break a little more. Phlegyas, the Inferno's elevator operator, had always been kind to me. His fatherly smile had been a comfort during all of my pre-coronation worries—which I now knew were more than justified—and being able to talk to him had always given me a little more strength. "Is he okay? You don't think the angels might have—"

"I'm not sure," Charon admitted. "I'm looking into it. Until then, I'll, ah..." He stooped to pick up The Beast, then backed away, bowing. "I'll give you a little space. There are fresh gowns for you in the wardrobe, and the guests you've summoned will be waiting in the throne room when you're ready. Just come outside and I'll take you right there."

"Thank you, Charon." I tried my best to force a smile, but I knew it didn't make it to my eyes. "I mean it. You're a saint."

"Hardly a *saint*," Charon scoffed. "Merely a servant. You're Queen of Hell now, Your Majesty. Anything you need, it's my duty to provide."

When Charon closed the door behind him, I knew I should have probably started chugging Gatorade so I could commence with peeing on some sticks.

But what I really wanted to do was cry some more. Maybe scream. At the very least, I wanted to swear.

An emphatic *God dammit!* seemed appropriate right about now.

But when I opened my mouth, I remembered the last words of Voltaire instead.

"Now, now my good man, this is no time to be making enemies."

Of course, he'd said that when he was asked to renounce Satan on his deathbed, whereas I would have given anything just to have Satan back here in my arms right now.

If only *speaking of the devil and he doth appear* had been true.

Halfheartedly, I swallowed as much of the Gatorade I could stomach and took the bag of tests into the bathroom.

If Luke had put a baby in me before he'd sacrificed himself, he'd given me more than just eternal life.

He'd given me something to live for while I figured out how to rescue him.

I wasn't leaving this room until I knew for sure.

EVIE

I walked into the throne room wearing a dress fit for a queen. If that wasn't enough to prove my new station here in Hell, the heavy crown I wore on top of my head left no room for doubt.

The gown was long, black, and hugged my curves like it was trying to make up for the loss of my husband. The crown was golden. It dripped with rubies and diamonds like drops of blood and falling stars.

I had no idea how to rule Hell without Luke. But at least, thanks to my regal new wardrobe, I knew I looked the part.

I still didn't know how I was going to get him back. But thanks to the pregnancy test I held in my hand, I knew more than ever that I had no choice.

I wasn't going to raise this baby alone.

Even if I had to burn Heaven to the ground to save him, I would.

Before me, a long black carpet stretched out down the center of the room. It led to a huge, high-backed throne wrought from black metal and golden skulls with red-jeweled eyes.

It was intimidating even just to look at.

Almost as intimidating as the realization that every set of eyes in the throne room was locked right on me as my golden heels carried me inside.

The Fallen were all present, just like Charon had promised. On either side of the throne, they stood in formation, all dressed in black. Mourning clothes, to honor the king that they'd lost.

Beelzebub—Zeb—wore an Armani suit and looked me up and down like I was something he'd like to have in his handsome, smirking mouth. Short, slender Mulciber twisted the hem of his dark tunic in his artist's fists. Mammon, ancient and hunched, licked his lips as I approached. Moloch—Lock's—mouth was set in a firm, hard line as he stood tall in a darker version of his tartan kilt.

Only beautiful, dark-haired Belial offered me a proper smile when she saw me—but it felt fake somehow, coming from her curling blood-red lips.

“Good morning, Your Majesty. Long live the queen,” she purred—then, to my surprise, she lowered herself to her knees.

One by one, the other Fallen followed suit.

Off to the side, I spotted Abaddon and Malacoda—Don and Mal—two of Luke's closest allies. With the single exception of Lock, I trusted the two of them more than I trusted all of the other Fallen put together.

Don gave me a tiny flash of smile that didn't quite reach his eyes. He was dressed in his typical 1950s-style suit, but he seemed to have left his usual suave smirk at the door. Mal, who wore a pair of dark jeans and a black button-down with the sleeves rolled up to his elbows, gave me a small nod of acknowledgment. Even from across the room, I could see the grief in his eyes.

I appreciated it. They loved Luke too. At least I knew they understood exactly what I'd lost.

What we'd all lost.

Together, they bent the knee to me as well.

Legion, with her dark cloud of sleek, coiled hair, wore a leather vest and matching pants. She looked beautiful and dangerous as ever, but her deep brown skin wasn't shimmering with glitter like it normally did. There was only one of her at the moment. Either her multiple forms had all converged for the occasion, or she'd sent them off to grieve in private.

As her black eyes met mine, she knelt with the others.

I guessed that meant she'd accepted me as her queen now, too.

I looked to the other side of the carpet, where my best friends were gathered in a little cluster. Ava looked like she'd been crying. Her cheeks were puffy and pink beneath her freckles. Her red hair hung down around her face like a bloody veil. Bea was tall and regal, with her chestnut hair pulled back into a severe bun. Joan had her jaw set hard, right in line with

her black bob. They were both putting on a good show of looking stoic, but I knew them too well to be fooled by that.

They knew how much I loved Luke.

They must have known the pain I felt now that he was gone, too.

Behind them, my parents both looked heartbroken. Dad had his arm around my mom, who was openly tear-faced. She dabbed at her cheeks with a tissue and took a step forward, like she wanted to come hold me—but then, she saw how the others were kneeling.

She knelt as well, followed by my father, then my friends.

I think that broke my heart most of all.

For a horrible moment, I wanted to scream at them. They were still human, even if I wasn't anymore. Just because I was queen now, I wasn't *their* queen.

I didn't want to be knelt at or bowed to or anything of the sort.

I wanted my mother to hug me and my father to reassure me that everything was all right. I wanted my friends at my side, not kneeling on the floor.

I wanted someone to tell me that Luke's sacrifice could be undone.

I wanted someone to tell me how the fuck we were going to bring him back. I didn't want to rule Hell alone. I didn't want to rule Hell at *all*—but if I had to, I wanted it to be *with* him. Not dimensions apart.

Today, more than ever, I knew he should have been standing here at my side.

But I was a queen now. It wasn't other people's job to console me.

I was supposed to be the one calling the shots.

"Thank you all for coming," I said to them all as I came to a stop, still several yards away from the throne. "It means the world to me that you're here. But please, stop kneeling. You don't need to."

I scanned the faces of my friends, my parents, and Luke's allies. I pleaded to them with my eyes. *I'm still your daughter. I'm still your friend.*

But even if my heart was broken, I could still read a fucking room.

They all saw me differently now.

Considering the way they'd watched Luke give up his satanic wings for me last night, only for a matching pair of black feathered ones to spring from my back in return, maybe they were right to.

I sighed.

They expected me to act like a queen right now, but I had no idea how.

"I'm pregnant," I said. Suddenly, my voice couldn't have been smaller. Or more tired, for that matter. I held up the test so they could all see it. "I don't know how, or when it happened, but... I'm going to have a child. So, I'd appreciate it if you'd all get up off your knees and help me figure out how to get my husband back."

"You're *what*?"

The question came from so many mouths, all at the same time, if I'd been in any other mood but this one, I might have laughed.

My mother's eyes were suddenly wide with surprise. My father's brow was knitted with disbelief. My friends all looked more worried than ever.

And as for the Fallen—

There was a big, glaring smile on each and every set of their lips now.

"You are certain, *bella*?" Mammon rose first, springing up to his feet like a man a quarter of his age. He rubbed his hands together like a praying mantis as he rushed over to me. "If this is true—*la realtà*—"

I offered him the pregnancy test. He grabbed it greedily and studied it with intense curiosity.

"What is this?" he asked, squinting at it. "Some sort of new infernal device, yes?"

"It's a pregnancy test," I explained. I wondered if it was worth mentioning that I'd just, uh, peed on one end of it just a few minutes ago before I'd placed the cap back on, but Mammon had a history of being a weird little creep and there were some things best left unsaid. "It's how humans determine whether or not they're, ah, with child. Charon bought me about two dozen of them. I tried them all." After a *lot* of Gatorade, I didn't bother adding. "They all said the same thing."

"Human tests might not work for you now, though." Mulciber approached me tentatively, but there was a wild look in his eyes like he wanted to believe. "If we had true proof—if only The Beast had arrived—"

I sighed and looked behind me, where Charon stood in waiting at the doors.

"Let him in." I gave Charon a nod.

Charon opened the doors again. A frantic clicking sound echoed from the hallway outside, getting louder and louder until the corgi puppy that had been licking my face when I woke up that morning raced inside. The Beast's little pink tongue lolled out of his mouth with excitement. He ran

up to my feet, settled his chubby backside down in front of them, and gave a single, high-pitched *yip!*

“The Beast is here.” I gestured down to the corgi, who was panting happily. He still didn’t look like a beast to me, but if that was what the Fallen were calling him too, I guessed it was too late to go changing his name now. “If a pregnancy test won’t assure you, I assume he’s proof enough?”

“More than enough.” Zeb strode forward and bowed low to me. He took my hand in his, then brought it up to his lips and kissed it. A little too passionately for my liking—and the dark glint in his eyes felt like bad news, too. “You’ve done it, Your Majesty. Congratulations. *Very well done.*”

“After millennia of fruitless waiting, Hell will finally have an heir to its throne.” Belial’s smile softened into something that almost looked warm and kind as she nudged Zeb aside and embraced me. “You’re going to be such a beautiful mother, darling. I simply can’t wait.”

“Ah, *perfezione, Madonna! Congratulazioni!* Why, with a child on the way, we must hold a board meeting immediately.” Mammon gave a brief scowl to my parents and friends, who were still frozen in shock and looking a little lost. “Once your pet humans are gone, of course.”

“They’re not my pets.” I glanced over at my friends and parents with an apologetic look in my eyes. They all still looked too stunned to even react.

“As you say. But stocks will be down with Luke’s absence. This news is *exactly* what we need right now. And as the new CEO of Adversary Industries, we’ll have so much to discuss before the boy’s birth.”

“We don’t know that it’ll be a boy.” I took a step back, furrowing my brow. “And...CEO? Mammon, I don’t want that. That’s Luke’s job. Not mine. Right now, all things considered, I’d rather focus our efforts on—”

“A bacchanal, of course.” Belial cut me off as she swatted Mammon away from me. “We’ll drink gallons of wine to Luke’s memory—and to you, and to the baby, of course. Then we’ll start a fire, maybe have a little fairy dust from Avalon, see where the night takes us...” She laughed and clapped her hands together in delight. “It’ll be *just* the thing to perk you up.”

“I’m not drinking anything, Bell.” My frown deepened. Wine? Fairy dust—whatever that was. Was she serious right now? “I’m pregnant—and

I don't want a bacchanal. What I *want* is to—"

"Finally finish the nursery!" I'd never seen Mulciber look happier. He was already reaching for the tube of design plans and blueprints he always kept strapped across his back. "I've been waiting an eternity—literally. And now that we know they'll be needed..."

"I'm not doing that either." Heat simmered in my chest, getting hotter by the minute. "This isn't the time for interior design planning. Right now, we need to—"

"We need to take care of *you*, Your Majesty." Zeb swept the others away and stepped forward again. Once more, he took my hand in his. "You're going through so much right now. I understand. I feel for you."

"Uh... thank you, Zeb." I hadn't counted on Zeb being the voice of reason this morning, but at least he was advocating for me. If he could just keep the others at bay for long enough, I might be able to get a word in edgewise so we could start planning for Luke's rescue. "That's... very sweet. I appreciate it."

"Losing your husband to the angels, finding out you're with child, becoming Queen of Hell—and all in less than twenty-four hours." Zeb squeezed my hand. "This is no time to be overwhelming you with petty details or parties or talk of business. Whatever you need right now, I want you to know that I'm here for you."

"Um. Thanks," I said again. I wasn't sure that I entirely bought the charade of sympathy coming from the Lord of the Flies himself, but it was better than Mammon's and Mulciber's and Belial's pestering. "In that case, what I need is—"

"A shoulder to cry on," Zeb cut me off. Infuriatingly. Even as their queen, not a single one of the Fallen seemed to have any interest in letting me finish. "A strong, capable man to take care of you here in your greatest hour of need."

"Uh. Well, I don't think that's..." I began, but it was no use.

This time, when Zeb lowered himself, he only dropped down to one knee. His dark eyes stared up at me, intensely passionate.

Amorous, even.

Oh, fuck no.

"You lost a husband last night," said Zeb. A buzzing sound began to fill the air around us. "Something that no woman should ever have to

endure. It would be my honor, my queen—my beautiful Evelyn—if you would allow me the pleasure of taking his place.”

I gaped at him in disbelief. Rage unfurled within my chest and fire burned at my fingertips, sparking to life as I tore my hand away from his.

“I don’t need a new husband,” I snapped at him, scowling. “Nor do I need to attend a board meeting, or get drunk and have an orgy, or pick out fucking... wallpaper!”

“But—” Zeb started, but I stopped him with a single, furious glare.

“I *have* a husband, Zeb.” I raised my hand to him so he could see the ring Luke had given me, still glimmering there on my finger. “And you still have a king. Just because Luke has gone back to Heaven doesn’t mean that he’s dead, and I’d appreciate it if you would all stop acting like it. Shape up, stop cutting me off, and *listen* to me for one second, will you?”

The Beast barked loudly at the Fallen as I took several steps back from them. I couldn’t believe the gall of them all. Here I was, pregnant and heartbroken and desperate to find some way to rescue Luke, and all they could think of were their petty desires and ploys for power?

As I took a final step away from them, I bumped into something big and firm at my back.

For a moment, I thought maybe it was Lock, backing me up—but then I turned to find a huge figure in a leather jacket and a shiny black motorcycle helmet.

The Fourth. He’d shown up after all.

At his presence and my rage, the Fallen all took a few steps back of their own.

“*Out.*” The Fourth’s voice boomed, impossibly deep, as he stuck out a thumb and jerked it toward the door. “*Now.*”

I knew The Fourth to be a man of very few words. In fact, I couldn’t recall him ever speaking at all before. But the way he commanded Luke’s inner circle of fallen angels...

I certainly wouldn’t have disobeyed him. The Fallen seemed to be of the same opinion.

Sulking and scowling, they trailed out of the throne room one by one. Only Lock remained behind.

“Thank you,” I whispered as I turned to The Fourth. He was so much taller than me, I had to crane my neck just to look up at him properly. Maybe my eyes were deceiving me, but in that moment, he looked nearly

seven feet tall—with the impossibly broad shoulders and thick, muscular arms to match his frame.

The Fourth didn't say anything back to me, nor did he take off his helmet. Beneath it, though, I knew he had a handsome face, dark hair, and soft, kind eyes.

As he gave me a single nod, I could feel the kindness in those eyes washing over me from behind his visor. I didn't have to see them to know it.

He felt bad about how all of this had gone down too.

Without another word, The Fourth followed the Fallen out.

It was quiet and tense for a long stretch of time after they left. I almost couldn't bear to look at my friends or my parents. I didn't know what they thought of me now that I was... whatever I was.

Infernal. A demon-thing. Queen of Hell.

But then, my mother moved toward me. She took me into her arms and held me in a tight, warm hug like I was a child again.

In an instant, for the first time since Luke had left me here in the palace we should have shared for the rest of our lives, I felt like maybe everything might be okay.

Or at least, like we might all find a way to put this right.

"Oh, Evie. Come here. I've gotcha." Mom stroked the back of my head like I'd just woken up from a nightmare. "The things you've been through... I'm so sorry, sweetie."

"We're proud of you, princess." Dad joined in on the hug from the side. "Or..." He chuckled and gave me a kiss just beneath the jewels of my crown. "Do I need to start calling you *queen* now?"

"I'll always be your princess, Dad." A laugh escaped my lips even though tears were forming in my eyes. Relief. After all they'd seen... even after the revelation that Heaven and Hell were real realms, that my husband was Satan himself and that now, I'd taken Luke's place as ruler of the damned... my parents still loved me. It was something—a small comfort in what had been starting to feel like a cold and comfortless new chapter. "I'm so sorry about everything. Thank you so much for being here for me anyway."

"Oh, Evie. What in the name of..." Mom pulled back, looked around, and laughed. There were tears in her eyes too. "Well. In the name of *this place* do you have to be sorry about?"

“Where the hell else would we be?” Dad added, squeezing a little tighter.

“I mean... I *did* marry the Devil without telling you.” I winced. My parents weren’t *that* Catholic, but they still did Christmas and Easter. I didn’t imagine getting hitched to Satan himself that was something most God-fearing mothers and fathers would appreciate. “If this is all a little much to wrap your heads around right now, I’d understand.”

“Can hardly blame you,” Mom said with a snort. “I *do* have eyes, Evie. Lookin’ like the way he does...”

“I didn’t hate him,” Dad mumbled in gruff agreement. “And you loved him. Still do. I can tell. Devil or not, that’s all that matters now.”

“Well...” Mom pursed her lips as she glanced at Dad, then gave me a tentative smile. “And there *is* one other thing. If I heard you right... if you’re serious...” Her smile widened. “Are we really going to be grandparents? You’re sure?”

“Mammon ran off with the pregnancy test, but...” I nodded. “I’m sure. There are two dozen other positive tests back in my bedroom here if you need more proof.”

“Oh, sweetie!” Mom squeezed me again, hard enough to force the air from my lungs. “We’re so happy for you. You just tell us what you need—anything at all.”

“I think what I need right now... is a plan.” I looked to my friends. To Legion and Lock and Mal and Don. “I know it probably sounds crazy, but I want to rescue Luke from Heaven. Whatever the deal he struck with the angels at the coronation—surely it can be unstruck, right?”

Lock, Mal and Don shared a tense look.

“There are... ways, aye.” Lock was the first to speak, breaking the tension with his burly Scottish brogue. “But ye won’t like any of them, I fear.”

“We’re at your service, Your Majesty,” Don added. “But Lock is right. We have options. Just not many good ones.”

“And as little as you’ll like ‘em, Luke will hate ‘em even more,” Mal drawled with a soft chuckle. “Not that it matters. If he didn’t want us goin’ and doin’ something shit-for-brains, he shoulda thought about that before he went and got his wings back.”

“Good.” My chest was tight as I wondered what *shit-for-brains* things we might be getting ourselves into here, but I was grateful that the others

were in agreement.

We were going to rescue Luke. It was what he would have done for me. One way or another, I was getting him back.

“The Fallen can’t be trusted to help with this, though.” Legion came to me and rested a hand on my shoulder. Her dark eyes were gentle, but her lips were set with worry. “You heard Beelzebub. He’s already looking for a way to make himself king. Mulciber is harmless, and Belial’s whims are unpredictable, but Mammon will want to find a way to turn Luke’s absence to his benefit, too. They have more freedom than ever now that Luke is away. They won’t be keen to be under his thumb again.”

“I don’t trust the Fallen at all,” I said simply, then looked to Lock. “No offense. Current company excluded, of course.”

“No offense taken, lass.” Lock gave a short, sharp snort. “You’re right not to trust them. We may’ve all fallen together, but now that the powers of Hell are out of sorts... They’ll be just as happy to watch things fall apart.”

“We should start planning right away, then,” said Don. “Before the Fallen start making plans of their own.”

“Maybe not *right* away.” Bea’s voice called out from behind Don. She pushed past him and took my hand in hers. Ava and Joan fell in close behind. “You’re pregnant, Eves. And if you’re happy, we’re happy for you...”

“But you look like hell right now.” Joan said, putting it bluntly. She usually did.

I laughed. “That’s fair. I feel like it, too.”

“That buzzing guy was right, though,” said Ava. “Not about trying to marry you—that was weird—but about you needing to take care of yourself. Have you even gotten breakfast yet? And are you sure you should be walking around in those ankle breakers?” Ava nodded at my heels, which admittedly, *were* starting to make my feet hurt.

“That crown looks pretty heavy, too, princess.” Dad looked me in the eyes as he raised his hands to it. An offer.

I nodded, then lowered my head to him so he could lift it up off of me. Its absence was a relief. Almost like without it, I could just be his daughter again. Just his princess—not a queen.

“Let’s get you into something comfortable and get some food in you,” Bea offered. “Then, you and the boys can start dreaming up rescue plans.”

“Aye,” Lock agreed. “We’ll need a mighty fine one if this is going to work, but we’re with ye, lass. Heaven’s stolen yer man. We’ll help ye get him back.”

“Meanwhile...” Mom looked to Dad with a mischievous glint in her eyes. “I think we’ve still got some baby clothes up in the attic back home. And that adorable little crib we used to have for Evie...”

“Would make sense to get a little more use out of it,” Dad said with a nod. “Might, ah... build a few bookshelves to match it, maybe? If the kiddo is anything like Evie, they’ll probably like to read...”

As they continued to make plans for their future grandchild, I stared at them for a long moment, relieved and a little stunned.

My parents hadn’t changed a bit. They still loved me. My friends were still here for me. Luke’s allies were willing to help me.

These realms that now ruled my life were still scary, uncertain things, but together, I knew, we could face them all.

It was only a matter of time before I was in Luke’s arm again. Queen of Hell—with an heir to the throne in my belly and my king once again at my side.

We just had to rescue him from whatever terrors he’d found in Heaven first.

LUKE

“This will hurt,” said Michael as he leveled the tip of the nail against the center of my palm. He didn’t look like he was about to enjoy driving it through my hand with the hammer he held in his fist. A relief.

“Yes,” I agreed, meeting his eyes. “I suppose it will.”

The archangel Michael and I had been friends, once upon an eternity. We’d laughed together. We’d planted a garden on Earth beneath the newborn sun, working side by side.

We’d watched the creation of the very first humans together.

That was where our friendship had taken a turn.

He’d seen them as dangerous. Creatures that needed to be controlled. For all I’d seen of humanity’s evils, he might have been right, too.

But I’d always seen them as just... people. Utterly unique creatures with joys and sorrows and heartaches who deserved the chance to make their own destinies. People who deserved to be free.

In hindsight, it was hard to say which had really happened first for me: falling from Heaven, falling in love with humanity...

Or falling for her.

Whichever was true, it didn’t matter.

I’d been damned for it anyway, and I was damned to this fate now.

As Michael brought down his hammer and sent the nail deep through my palm, a ragged snarl of pain left my lips. White-hot pain wracked

through my body. Beads of sweat formed on my brow.

“Repent, and it will be over.” Michael’s voice held a regret in it I hadn’t heard in a long time. For so many centuries, we’d been enemies. It was strange, through the haze of agony, to hear him to speak to me like a friend again. “I’ll pull out the nail. You can rejoin the armies of Heaven. We can forget that this ever happened at all.”

Slowly, I shook my head. “I can’t repent, and you know it.”

“And why not?” Michael moved my free hand to the piece of lumber that stretched across my bare shoulders. I’d removed my shirt, along with my socks and shoes, before this started. When I made this deal with Michael, I’d accepted my fate. I wasn’t about break my vow now, no matter the pain. But I hadn’t seen any reason to let this punishment ruin a perfectly good shirt.

“Because of what you want me to repent for.”

“Repentance for sin isn’t hard. Acknowledge it. Accept what you’ve done. Let the love of Heaven fill your heart once more and agree to become better. Simple as that.”

“You think my sin is her.” I shook my head as Michael pressed the nail against my palm. “I can’t repent for something I don’t regret.”

“Your sin is *pride*, you stubborn bastard.” Michel’s lips curled and strained as he pounded the second nail into my hand, pinning it firmly to the wooden cross I now bore.

The pain hit me again, intense enough that my vision went white with it.

In that blinding whiteness, I tried to remember the way her eyes looked when she’d smiled at me.

I found that I could. Easily. They were a lovely gray that lit up like a stormy sky just before lightning struck.

It made everything hurt just a little bit less.

“Yes. Pride. Maybe so.” I had to force the words through gritted teeth as my vision returned and I looked up to Michael again. “I’m proud that she’s mine. If that’s a sin, then what can I say?” I forced my lips into a grin. “I’m sinner.”

“You’re an angel,” Michael scoffed back at me. “And she was never anything more than another silly human, Lucifer. When will you finally learn? Your love was never meant to be. Your *sin* is believing that you could twist fate in your favor anyway.”

Even as my blood—pearly and opalescent again now, where for so long, it had been black as night—ran down my wrist, I couldn't help it. I laughed through the pain.

"She's not a human anymore." It was my single triumph in all of this. In his desire to bring me back into the fold, Michael had caused that turn of events himself. When I crowned Evie, I made her my queen. When I'd let Michael take my wings, I'd abdicated the throne of Hell to her.

Hell couldn't be ruled by a mere mortal, though. She'd taken on my devilishness along with her new title.

Evie wasn't human at all now. She was infernal. An immortal queen to take the place of the king that Hell had just lost.

Now, no one would ever be able to hurt her again.

If Michael was bothered by the reminder of it, he didn't make any indication of it.

Instead, he dropped to his knees and positioned the last nail—the longest of the three—against my feet.

I knew this one would hurt most of all.

"I wish you would stop fighting me." Michael raised the hammer and looked up at me. There was something almost pleading in his eyes.

Give in, they said. Don't make me do this. All of this can end here and now. You can make this stop any time you want.

"I wish I could," I admitted. If all of this had played out differently, we could have remained friends through all these centuries instead of warring as enemies.

But he'd chosen his side long ago. And if my choice was between Evie and Heaven...

I'd choose her every damn time.

It was such an easy decision, it hardly felt like a choice at all.

He drove the nail into my feet with a single, swift blow. Its tip pierced through the top of one, just above my toes, then passed into the top of the other.

It burned hotter than any hellfire I'd ever known.

Distantly, I was aware that I was screaming. My vision left me again. This time, its color wasn't white. This time, it went as black as a starless night.

Within that darkness, for a moment, I was certain that I could see her.

She danced before my eyes beneath the soft glow of a spotlight. Her hair hung down in its blonde waves, golden and shimmering. The smile on her lips sent warmth rising up within my chest. Dark-feathered wings spread from behind her, beautiful and entirely her own. The way her hips moved, the fullness of her breasts—in an instant, my cock began to stiffen in response. I only got harder as I saw the look in her hooded eyes, wicked and full of promises to match as she reached out to me, caressing my cheek.

Yes. I may have been an angel again now, and she, a devil of her own right, but she was mine.

My Evie, more herself than ever before.

My bride. My queen. My wife.

“Lucifer,” she purred against my ear as she took me into her embrace. My body was weary with pain, but I rose to her anyway. *“I love you. I miss you. It’s going to be all right.”*

Her lips brushed against mine, so tantalizing my breath caught in my throat with hope.

Even if I hung here in Heaven on the cross that I was distantly still aware my body was nailed to for the rest of eternity, I’d spend every minute of it yearning to feel her lips against mine again.

“Lucifer.” Her lips brushed against mine and an explosion of heat burst inside me.

She was wildfire, and I was a forest. My hands burned with how badly I wanted to touch her. My feet strained against the nail that held them down, desperate to follow as she moved away.

“Lucifer!”

I blinked and my vision faded back in. Evie was gone once more. The voice that was calling out to me now wasn’t hers at all.

Michael’s fingers twisted my hair at the back of my skull as he lifted my head up. He forced my eyes to meet his.

“What happened?” I murmured. My body felt heavy and full of pins.

“You passed out.” Mournfully, Michael shook his head. *“From the pain, probably. Frankly, I’m surprised it took you as long as it did.”*

“Put me back under then.” My voice sounded drunk. It echoed strangely in my ears. *“I want to kiss my wife.”*

“Is that what you were doing while you were unconscious?” Michael dropped my head unceremoniously. *“You’re predictable, Lucifer. You*

never learn, do you?”

“Maybe I’ve got a shitty teacher.”

“Shut up and stay conscious.” Michael rose to his feet as the door to the room opened. Gabe came through it, his white wings visible at his back and his face looking grim. “Now that you can’t leave—”

“Wasn’t trying to,” I murmured back at him. “You really think you could have nailed me down if I had any intention of putting up a fight?”

Michael ignored my comment. Probably because he couldn’t think of anything clever to say back to it. “We have something to show you, Lucifer. You’d do well to pay attention to it.”

Michael nodded at Gabe, who waved his hand through the air before me. I struggled to lift my head so I could peer through it.

I didn’t know what I was expecting. Heavenly family Christmas party photos? The *Minions* movie on repeat? The possibilities for the next torture Michael planned on trying to break me with were endless.

But whatever I might have expected, I never would have guessed what I saw.

Through the portal, lush greenery sprawled out as far as the eye could see. Fragrant flowers were in full bloom. A warm, humid breeze kissed my cheeks, teasing me.

I didn’t know what I was looking at and I didn’t care to try and figure it out.

All I could think was how much I would have preferred to have Evie’s lips against my cheeks instead.

“Been doing some gardening, have you?” My throat was raw.

“No. But it would seem that you have.” Michael gestured to the portal. A pair of Fennec foxes were frolicking in the foreground, chasing butterflies. Somewhere out of sight, I could hear the churning of a waterfall. “This is the Sahara, Lucifer.”

I forced a laugh. “Is this your latest ploy? Fucking with my head?”

The Sahara was a barren wasteland. It was right there in the name—*Sahara*. The Arabic word for desert. Didn’t get any more literal than that.

But then, I thought of the flowers that Don and I had found blooming there outside of Alexander’s tomb when we went to collect the final nail—the one that currently pinned my feet to the length of wood that pressed against my heel.

Could it be...?

No. Surely not.

Those flowers had bloomed because of my love for Evie. Now that I knew we'd never see each other again, there was no reason it would be anything more than hot sun and dry sand.

"We're not toying with you, Lucifer," Michael said sternly. "We have no reason to lie. Not now."

"Well, I certainly haven't gone sowing any seeds *there*." After my last gardening debacle on Earth—the planting of the eglantine roses whose vines I'd tried to climb back up into Heaven on—I'd regulated all of attentions of my green thumb to Hell.

"No," Michael agreed. "But you *have* been sowing your seed, haven't you?"

I furrowed my brow as I met his eyes. "Why are showing me this, Michael? Speak plainly, my ears are still ringing from these fucking nails you've driven through me."

"Because you deserve to know." Michael looked at the nail in my bloodied left hand with regret. "We're not monsters, Lucifer. Those were the only way we could assure that you'd stay here and keep your end of the deal once you learned the truth."

"And here I am." My mouth was as dry as the so-called desert I was currently gawking at should have been. "Get on with it, then."

"Your woman is pregnant and it's fucking up the balance of the Earth," Gabriel blurted out before Michael could open his mouth. He glared at me, then added, as an afterthought: "Dumbass."

My mouth fell open slightly as I tried to think of an insult to shoot back at Gabe. The only thing that came to mind was *takes one to know one*. My brain obviously wasn't firing on all cylinders.

I was lucky it was still firing at all.

"I'm afraid that's not possible," I finally said. My heart was thrumming with the elation of a *what if* in my chest, but I swallowed hard to force the feeling down. "She has a—"

"Birth control implant?" Michael crossed his arms over his chest. He couldn't have looked less amused. "Not *has*. Had. It was removed. Very much not part of our plan, but..."

"Nothing we can do about it now." Gabe glowered. "Congratulations, adversary. It's at great cost, of course... but you've finally won."

I looked between the two of them, still struggling to hold my head up through the pain that shot through my hands and feet. My eyes searched for the slightest hint of a lie in either of their faces.

I blinked as I failed to find one.

Evie. Pregnant. I understood the words independently of each other, but together?

Together, they meant so much, for a moment the pain in my body was entirely overwhelmed.

The excitement of it struck me again. My Evie. My bride. My child in her womb, growing stronger every day. Making the Earth's greatest desert bloom and flourish into a jungle before they were even born.

The vision of Evie my subconscious had conjured when I was knocked out had been exquisite. Beautiful beyond any other beauty I'd ever known.

But imagining her pregnant—belly growing firm and round, skin shining, breasts swelling with milk— It was a damn good thing I was in too much agony to actually get hard right now.

It was an even greater agony to realize that I'd never see her again, knowing what I knew now.

But my excitement and my pain were selfish things to think about in this moment. Impossible to deny, but far from the full picture.

This child would make me a father. Hell would finally have an heir. And for Evie, if she was happy about it—god, I hoped she was—she would have some small part of me there with her still. Even as I was torn apart here in Heaven, there would still be something for her to remember me. A baby. Our own creation. Ours and ours alone.

It meant everything to me.

But it meant things for Earth, too. Not all of them necessarily good.

"The Sahara blooming isn't even the half of it." Michael's voice was suddenly cold. He didn't look like he regretted driving those nails through my skin so much anymore. "The world we created for the humans is more out of balance than it's ever been. Across thousands and thousands of years of struggle, we've fought against each other over this, Lucifer."

"You, creating chaos. Us, trying to set things right." Gabe closed the portal to the Sahara with a sharp, sudden wave of his hand. "Now, you've finally managed to tip the scales in your favor, you bastard."

"You know what comes next, Lucifer." Michael licked his lips almost nervously. His eyes softened, pleading with me again. "If this child is born

—if he’s allowed to grow into a man...”

“He’ll bring the world to destruction.” I stared up at him with a steely gaze. Michael was trying to make it sound like he was playing the voice of reason to me, but I knew the beginning of a threat when I heard one. “I know what your prophecies say.”

“And you don’t care?”

Gabe scoffed. “Of course he doesn’t. You can take the Devil out of Hell, but you can’t take Hell out of the Devil. He doesn’t give a damn if the world burns. He never loved the humans to begin with. Only *her*.”

I could have argued with him, but it would have been splitting hairs.

Would I sacrifice all of humanity for the lives of my wife and unborn child?

In an instant. Just as quickly as I’d sacrificed myself.

Gabe was right. I supposed I really was still the devil after all.

“You want to save the Earth? Let me go, then,” I suggested, nodding to the nail through my right hand. “A child shouldn’t have to grow up without a father. Maybe in taking me from its life, you’ve set your own prophecy into motion.”

“Or, more likely, in insisting to marry your very own forbidden fruit over and over again throughout the ages, you’ve assured that the prophecy will be fulfilled yourself.” Michael shook his head. “I’m not letting you go, Lucifer. I’m asking you to repent for your sins because despite all of them, I still love you like a brother.”

“You’re asking me to repent for my so-called sins,” I spat back at him, “Because you’re hoping if I do it, I’ll help you kill my own child so you can keep your hands clean.”

“That *child* will grow into an adult, Lucifer! He’ll bring about the Final Hour. The End of Days themselves! If you love your precious humans so much, why don’t you care that they’ll all die because of what you’ve done?” Michael’s brow was knitted with rage.

“I do care,” I said simply. “But it seems that we’re once again in disagreement about the nature of the humans’ world. The prophecy says my child will be a great leader of men. Uniter of all humans on Earth.”

“And he will lead those men to their own destruction,” Michael snapped. “Don’t quote our own prophecies at me just to ignore the most important part. That child will burn the entire Earth to ash and dust by the time he’s grown.”

“Forests burn all the time.” I couldn’t shrug. I didn’t have the range of motion for it in my current state, nor the energy to try. “It turns the soil rich, destroys the things that are old and rotten and need to be set aflame. And in the wake of those flames, new growth springs up from beneath the charred earth.”

“You’re talking nonsense, Lucifer.” Michael’s lips curled with scorn.

“I’m talking nature, Michael.” I shook my head. The pain I’d been overwhelmed by mere moments ago was quickly being replaced with a barely contained fury all my own. “The humans are just as resilient as that jungle coming to life out of the Sahara’s sands. If the world burns, maybe the world needs to burn. And from its ashes, a new era will be reborn. One of peace and prosperity and goodwill between men. Full knowledge and free will for all.”

“The humans don’t need free will!” Michael’s voice boomed out and echoed around the room loudly enough to make the walls shake. “I can’t believe that after all this time, you’re still as naive as you were the day you fell.”

“You’re the one who said it.” I smirked at him. “I never learn.”

“The humans don’t even *want* free will. Let alone need it,” said Gabriel.

“What they want is guidance. Someone to reassure them that they’re on the right paths,” Michael said, nodding to Gabe in agreement. “What they need is faith. Structure. Ways to ensure the avoidance of sin.”

“Maybe that’s your problem, Michael.” I chuckled, energized by the fact that I knew I was getting to him. “You’ve been avoiding sin too successfully. Bet you’d be less stressed all the time if you could just get laid.”

His hand raised so quickly, I wondered if he’d even realized he’d hit me by the time his fist crashed against my nose.

That hurt, too. Not as badly as any of the nails had, but enough.

I supposed I deserved that one, at least. Michael never had liked when I’d tried to play angel’s advocate.

“You’re an angel again now. Start acting like one.” Michael shook out his hand as he stood over me.

As blood pooled from my sinuses into the back of my throat, I spat it out on his shoes, relishing the fact that the punch looked like it’d hurt his knuckles almost as much as it’d hurt my nose.

“Not going to happen,” I told him. “I promised I’d come back to Heaven with you. I promised I’d reclaim my wings.” My smile was a smug one. Full of pain, yes. Full of delight in defiance as well. “But I never promised I’d obey.”

Michael stared at me for a long moment. Then, raising his fist with full intent this time, he hit me again.

This time, it hurt even less.

“We’ll see about that,” he growled at me. “Gabriel? Get the knives.”

I saw them both search my face for fear before Gabriel turned to fetch Michael new weapons.

I saw their disappointment when they didn’t find any, too.

I was a thousand leagues away from fear now.

In my mind, there was no room for it.

The only thing my thoughts had room for was her.

My Evie. I missed her like a hurricane missed land. Michael had been right. If he hadn’t nailed my palms and feet to his cross, I would have gone to her in an instant when I learned she was with child.

Now, more than ever, I yearned to rip those nails from my hands so I could fold her into my arms again.

I should have thanked Michael for nailing me down, though. Going to her now would only put her in danger. I’d promised that I would come here. I’d promised that I would stay.

In exchange for never seeing her again, I hadn’t just assured Evie’s safety.

I’d guaranteed the safety of our child as well.

I knew damn well why Michael needed me to work with him so badly.

For as long as I kept up my end of the bargain, the only angel in all of Heaven who would be able to hurt Evie now was me.

My wife was safe. Our child would be born into a world that was safe for it to live in and grow.

And if that baby grew up into a conqueror who destroyed the Earth itself, so be it.

I’d meant what I said.

I truly believed a better world would rise up from the ashes in my son’s wake.

All this pain that my body held within it now?

It didn’t matter. It was nothing. I could cope.

Compared to what I'd gained today, it was a small price to pay.

EVIE

“So we’re really calling this stumpy little ball of fuzz *The Beast*, huh?” Joan sidestepped around The Beast as he trotted out of the elevator into Heresy with us, his little wet nose sniffing the floor with determination.

“Looks more like a Cupcake to me,” Bea agreed. “Or, I don’t know, Noodles?”

“How about Mr. Sprinkles?” Ava suggested.

“Absolutely not.” Legion looked at Ava like she’d just started saying a rosary. “It may look cute now, but that puppy is a bona fide hellhound. The Beast of the Earth. Scourge of the land, commander of sin, devourer of the holy—”

“Yeah, well, all he seems interested in devouring right now are my Jimmy Choos.” Gently, Bea nudged The Beast away from her heel, which it had taken into its mouth with sudden and intense interest. “Maybe that’s what we should call him. Jimmy.”

“I think *The Beast* might’ve already stuck, unfortunately,” I said with a sigh. “Maybe he’ll grow into it.”

I was dressed in something far comfier than my royal regalia now that Charon had brought us back to the Inferno from the pits of Hell. At least I could chalk *riding through Hell in a limousine* off my bucket list, I guessed.

If Mal, Don and Lock were as serious about helping me get Luke back as I thought they were, pretty soon I'd be able to check off *planning a heist of Heaven while wearing sweatpants* too.

My make-up from the meeting in the throne room was still on my face. Dark eyeliner, deep red lips. But my hair was piled up into a high, messy bun. I'd traded my heels for a pair of comfy running shoes. Over the sweatpants, I wore one of Luke's t-shirts. It said *Joy Division, Love Will Tear Us Apart*.

I'd never seen him wear it, but somehow, it still smelled like him.

I glanced at Legion as she led us to a table in the midst of all the writers and poets who came to the sixth floor to read and write and drink. "Is The Beast at least housebroken?"

"Probably." Legion shrugged as she pulled out a chair and waved me into it. "If he's not, it's hardly *your* problem, though. You're a queen now, remember? You have minions you can order to scoop the poop."

Ava snorted at Legion's phrasing. If I wasn't still feeling so off-kilter, I might have as well.

I didn't know what all the demons of Hell busied themselves with here, but trying to imagine an army of tall, dark and horrible creatures tasked with cleaning up after a corgi puppy was almost enough to make me smile.

Almost.

"So, tell us, *Your Majesty*, what are we drinking this morning?" Legion said as I lowered myself into the chair she'd chosen for me. "Dirty martinis? Margaritas? Champagne?"

"I'm pregnant, Leigh." I glanced over my shoulder at her. Did the women of Hell really drink while pregnant? I guessed misbehavior was technically on trend here—it wouldn't be Hell otherwise—but I couldn't help but balk at the idea anyway. "I don't think I'm even supposed to be drinking caffeine anymore."

"You've also been through some serious shit over the last few days," Legion countered. "And there are no repercussions for things like that here. Remember, you're Infernal now, too? You can eat all the sushi, guzzle all the coffee, and clean all the litter boxes you like. You're essentially bulletproof—as long as the bullets aren't made from blessed iron, of course—and so is that little life in your womb. A stiff drink won't hurt either of you. And given, well, everything." Legion waved vaguely, which just about summed it up. "You probably need one, too."

It was tempting, I had to admit—but so was everything in the Inferno. But as nice as it would be to drink away my pain, my stomach rebelled at the idea of dumping alcohol into it. Just thinking about booze made me feel a little nauseated.

“I think I’d rather keep a clear head right now.” I forced a smile as I glanced over my shoulder at her. “Maybe just...I don’t know, some orange juice?”

“Whatever you say. You *are* the queen, I suppose.” Legion headed off to the bar while Joan, Ava and Bea took seats at the table.

As for The Beast, he settled his furry little behind on my feet, curled up, and closed his eyes for a nap.

“So...” Bea glanced between Joan and Ava, then gave me a tense smile. “Pregnant, huh?”

“Looks like.” I tried to return the smile, but it was hard to.

I’d never imagined myself as an expecting mother before. Pregnancy seemed like something that was supposed to happen to a future Evie. One who had her shit together and her husband back. Processing the reality of my new condition felt like trying to grab hold of water. My emotions were an aquarium of disaster churning inside me, threatening to break loose if I so much as tapped on the glass.

“Did you and Luke plan that?” Ava asked.

“I thought I was on birth control.” I moved my hand to my arm and ran my fingers over the place where my implant had once been. Disappeared now—just like Phlegyas. “If Luke would have told me about what he planned to do at the coronation, maybe we could have talked about it first... but he didn’t.”

“He didn’t tell you?” Ava’s eyes widened with shock. “Why wouldn’t he have warned you? That’s... kind of fucked up.”

“Very,” Joan and Bea agreed.

I looked down at The Beast, who’d started to snore gently on top of my shoes.

“I knew something was wrong,” I admitted. “He told me he would explain everything once the coronation was over.”

And technically, he had. Luke hadn’t lied to me, exactly—just omitted the fact that we’d only have a few hours together before he had to leave me forever. I missed him enough, I was trying not to dwell on that.

“I’d be pissed,” Bea said with a shrug. “I’m surprised you’re not.”

"I think he didn't tell me for a reason." It hurt to admit that part, but I knew how much Luke loved me. He'd shown me so many times. He'd made a point of telling me so every single day. And within that love, I knew he wouldn't have hurt me if he hadn't needed to. "I think he knew that if he told me, I'd try to stop him."

And he would've been right.

I understood the gravity of the sacrifice he'd made to keep me safe. I was living it.

But was my safety really worth an eternity without him?

The baby in my belly was the answer to that. Without it, I would have happily died and been reincarnated all over again. But it wasn't just my safety I had to worry about anymore.

"So, it was a happy accident, then," Joan said. She raised an eyebrow. "I mean... you *are* happy, right?"

I sighed. "If he hadn't sacrificed himself for me... if he was still here..." God. It was almost too good to even be able to imagine. "Honestly? I think I'd be ecstatic. I'd spend the next nine months looking at as many paint colors and bassinets for the nursery as Mulciber liked. But as things are now..."

"You miss him," said Ava.

I nodded. "I do."

"It's more than that though, isn't it?" Bea placed her hand over mine on top of the table and gave my fingers a squeeze. "Your marriage happened so fast, and we knew you had to get hitched to him to keep you safe from the angels... But it wasn't just for safety in the end, was it? You love him. You really do."

"Yeah, I do." My brow knitted as I recalled all the times I'd tried to tell him as much. All the times I'd failed. "I just wish I would have had the chance to tell him so before he left."

The girls all stared at me for a long moment. Sadness sank into their faces as my gaze met each of theirs.

"I'm so sorry, Eves." Ava spoke first. There were tears in her eyes all over again.

"That's not fair," Bea agreed.

"It's not fucking *right*," Joan growled.

"Orange juice with no vodka?" Legion returned to the table with a tray full of frosted glasses. "I know. It's a damn shame, but what the queen

wants...”

“No,” I explained as Legion handed me an ice-cold glass of OJ. “We’re talking about Luke. I... I didn’t manage to tell him that I loved him before we left. I had time to, but I was...” I rolled my lips between my teeth, trying to bite back the feeling of shame that was filling my head all over again. “I was too busy trying to order him to stay. Now, he’ll never know.”

Legion gave me a look of annoyance as she took a seat. “Oh, please. You can’t really be that dumb.”

I blinked, then lowered my eyes.

“I shouldn’t have been,” I agreed. “But I was.”

“No, not about that. Drink your orange juice and chin up, for fuck’s sake.” Legion rolled her eyes. “Luke knows you love him. Do you really think he was that oblivious?”

“But...” My mouth gaped open for a moment as I tried to find words to fill it. “I never told him. I tried to, but—”

“Evie, sweetheart, there are more ways to say *I love you* than just saying it.” Legion sipped her orange juice, blanched, then shook her head. “You stayed with him. You didn’t try to run away from him this time. You made him laugh. You made him happy. The two of you could hardly keep your hands off each other. You really think all the time you spent together meant nothing because you didn’t manage to put it into words? Ridiculous.”

I blinked again.

I supposed, in a way, she was right.

“I guess I just regret not saying it,” I said softly. “Whether he knew it was true or not.”

Across the table, Ava made a tiny noise of annoyance. Her face was fixed into a pout.

“You okay, Aves?” Joan asked, placing a hand against Ava’s back.

“I think I’m in love with Mal.” She looked rattled by the concept. It was actually a little adorable.

Bea laughed. “Yeah, no shit. You’ve been in love with him ever since you first met. You told him yet?”

“No. We’ve been... taking things slow.” Ava’s cheeks were suddenly bright pink. She wouldn’t meet any of our eyes. “We were kind of planning to... you know, do the nasty. After the coronation. Before everything went sideways, I mean.”

Very carefully, I swallowed down a laugh. “Do the nasty?”

“Oh, leave me alone. You know what I mean.” Ava’s brow knitted in frustration. “Go to... you know, fifth base.”

Legion arched a brow. “Anal?”

“No!” Ava slapped her hands over her mouth. “I mean... um, touch poles?”

“I think that’s just for gay dudes, Aves.” Joan patted Ava’s back sympathetically, but her face was twisted like she was trying not to laugh as well. “You’re talking about fucking, right?”

Ava sighed. “Yes. That.”

“Well, from the sounds of things, you’re right to wait.” Legion rolled her eyes again. “If you can’t say it, you certainly have no business doing it.”

“We’re happy for you though, Aves.” I gave her a small smile, even though I knew she couldn’t see it. She was currently busy hiding her face in her hands in pink-cheeked shame. “Really. I’m sorry that the drama spoiled your special night, but I think it’s really sweet that you’re taking things slow.”

“Hard to imagine a demon taking anything slow, but if it’s working for you—” Bea cut herself off abruptly as her eyes focused on something behind me.

Now, Ava wasn’t the only one blushing.

“What’s this about demons taking things slow?” Don slipped into the seat next to me with a smirk on his lips. “Good to see you again, Beatrice.”

“Oh, fuck off.” Bea crossed her arms over her chest and looked away.

“Everything all right, Don?” I looked between him and Bea. I knew that Bea wasn’t exactly as charmed by Don as Ava was by Mal. And unlike Joan and Lock, the two of them were hardly friends.

But that particular reaction of Bea’s seemed... a little much, given the circumstances.

“I’m not sure,” Don said slowly. His eyes hadn’t left Bea yet. “But maybe Beatrice has something to say.”

“Not a thing,” Bea said flippantly.

“Oh, fucking hell.” Leigh knocked back the rest of her orange juice, scowling. “If the two of you won’t come out with it, someone has to.”

“Come out with what?” asked Joan.

“The two of them have been fucking for months now.” Legion waved her hand between Bea and Don. “And neither of them wants to admit it for some stupid reason, even though it’s so blatantly obvious it makes my teeth ache.”

I looked between Bea, who looked more annoyed than ever, and Don, who looked smug.

“So... Don is the mysterious guy you’ve been casually seeing, then?” I asked. It honestly made sense in a lot of ways. “Wait—was Don the guy who stood you up that day you asked me for a ride back here from UCLA?”

“Yes,” Bea grumbled, staring at the wall like she wanted to put the heel of one of her Jimmy Choos through it. “If you must know, it was.”

“Didn’t mean to, of course.” Don gave Bea a wink, which only made her scowl harder. “But when Evie and Luke were attacked by those angel-touched humans... well, duty called.”

“Sorry,” I told Bea, wincing.

“It’s fine. Really.” Bea sighed. “I was only keeping it quiet because you all know how complicated my love life is. Perpetually. I didn’t want to make it awkward when it came time to send out wedding announcements.”

Bea reached into purse and pulled out a huge, honking engagement ring. There were enough massive diamonds on it, as she put it on her finger, I was surprised that her wrist didn’t collapse under its weight.

As much as I wished that the ring had been Don’s doing, I knew that was far from the case. Bea had been in an arranged engagement with the son of her father’s business partner since approximately the time of her birth.

I guessed with Bea’s master’s degree wrapping up this summer, her family had finally decided to pull the trigger and make things official once and for all.

“I could still take care of that for you, you know,” Don offered. There was something dark and murderous glimmering in his eyes. “Wouldn’t even be hard.”

“It’s fine.” Bea waved the offer away, but I could have sworn I caught a flicker of regret pass over her face as she did it. “Did you need something, Don, or are you just here in the hopes that I’ll tell everyone how big your dick is?”

“Oh, you don’t have to talk me up like that, darling.” Don flashed his teeth at her. “Most people can tell that just by looking at me.”

Bea gave him the finger, and Don laughed.

“*Did* you need something, Don?” As cute as it was to see them flirt—albeit in the weirdest way possible—the sadness that had flashed through Bea’s eyes had felt akin to my own.

She obviously cared about Don too, in her own way.

And just like I’d lost Luke, there was no way she could get out of her current engagement. Especially if her family was already planning the wedding invitations.

It seemed cruel to make her play out all of her emotions in front of everyone like this.

“I do, actually,” Don admitted. “You want to rescue Luke from the angels. Correct?”

“More than anything.” I nodded, turning toward him. “And you all think it can be done?”

“It might be messy. We’ll need a good distraction, which I think Mal and I can provide. And we don’t expect that Luke will exactly be... in the best health when we do get to him.” Don sighed. “His war with Heaven is full of old wounds. The angels will almost certainly want repayment for that.”

I bit my lip, then nodded again. “I don’t expect anything less. What else do you need? What can I do to help?”

“Well...” Don gave me a sad, tense smile. “How bad is your morning sickness, Evie? Are you feeling up for coming along with us?”

“Of course,” I said immediately. “The morning sickness I can manage. It shouldn’t be a problem at all.”

Honestly, I was surprised that Don had even asked. I’d just assumed that I would be part of the rescue team.

“It will be dangerous,” Don warned me. “For you, and possibly for the baby as well. If you have even the smallest shred of hesitation...”

“Oh.” I placed my hand over the base of my stomach. I was still getting used to this pregnancy thing. I’d only just found out this morning. “The baby... I hadn’t thought about that.”

Idiot. This baby was the last thing that Luke had left for me.

If we failed, the child that Luke and I had made together would be all I’d ever have of him at all.

“If all goes as planned, there’s nothing to worry about,” Don assured me. “We wouldn’t be inviting you along at all if it wasn’t necessary. But unfortunately, it is.”

“How do you mean?” I asked. I’d honed my swordsmanship skills in preparation for the coronation. I had more control over the flames I could make with my hands than I’d ever had before. But Don and Mal and Lock were all battle-hardened warriors, and I was just...

Me.

“You’re Luke’s anchor,” Don explained. “The bond between husband and wife is the most powerful thing in all the worlds... save for, maybe, the bond between parents and children.”

Don nodded to the hand I still held over my belly. Beneath it, I felt flame flicker at his acknowledgment of it.

“To break the bonds that Luke has made to Heaven, you’ll need something with that kind of power,” Legion agreed. “Don’s right. If you want to bring Luke back, the best chance is if you go get him yourself.”

“I’ll burn in Heaven now though, won’t I?” I moved my thumb over my belly, doing my best to comfort that warmth I felt within it. “Will it hurt the baby too?”

“It’s too small. Still innocent,” Don assured me. “But, yes, it will hurt you.”

“That’s fine,” I said immediately. “Is that all?”

“Not quite.” Don sighed with regret. “I need you to understand that the angels will have a vested interest in that child. They’ll do their damndest to ensure that Luke isn’t lost to them as-is. If they realize you’re pregnant—assuming they already haven’t—then they’ll stop at nothing to make sure you’re not able to leave either.”

“Then we won’t let that happen.” I shrugged. “Simple as that.”

“No,” Don agreed. “We won’t. You don’t have a choice about that, Evie. If this goes badly—if you’re at risk of being taken by them—Lock, Mal and I have already agreed. We’d rather die in Heaven than see you fall into the angels’ clutches. This is nonnegotiable. If it comes down to a matter of us, or you—you choose yourself. Can you handle that?”

I pursed my lips, feeling tears in my eyes all over again.

“Do I really have a choice?”

Don’s sad smile returned. “No. You don’t.”

“Thank you,” I whispered. “I hope you know how much that means to me.”

“We’re not doing it out of charity,” Don said. “We want Luke back too. No matter the stakes.”

“When do we leave, then?” If today had been any other day, I would have needed to spend it frantically working on my thesis to make up for lost time. But given that my adviser had just turned out to be an angel hell-bent on making me his own—and that he had been taken away to Heaven as well—my schedule was suddenly looking emptier than it had ever been.

“Tonight,” said Don. “You know that we’re loyal to you. The other Fallen, though... we can’t risk waiting. They have their own motivations and desires. Luke never wanted war between Heaven and Hell. The others, left to their own devices and with enough time to plan in Luke’s absence... well, we don’t need them getting any ideas about finishing off old grudges once and for all.”

“Good.” Tonight was fine by me.

“We’re coming too,” Joan piped up, raising her glass of orange juice like a Viking princess making a toast. “You’ll need all the firepower you can get, from the sounds of things.”

“No,” Don, Legion and I all said at the same time.

“What?” Bea looked furious all over again.

“We want to help, though!” Ava insisted.

“This isn’t your battle,” I told them. “Don and Mal and Lock are all infernal. Now, so am I. But you’re all still...” I sighed. The status of our mortalities had already dug a palpable ditch between us. One that we’d all been avoiding discussing. I didn’t want to dig it any deeper. “You’re human. All three of you.”

“And as humans in Heaven, you’d be most at risk.” Don shook his head. “You three will all stay here with Legion to protect you.”

Joan looked to Legion immediately, glass still in hand. “In that case, I’d like some vodka in this now.”

Legion smirked and pointed her finger at Joan’s drink. The level of the liquid immediately paled and raised by an inch. “Thought you’d never ask.”

“Luke will still be an angel when we rescue him though, right?” I turned back to Don, ready to smooth out the rest of our plans. “We can’t bring him back to Hell. He’ll burn here.”

I'd seen that firsthand when we'd said our goodbyes.

"We'll need a safe place on Earth where we can take him to heal whatever wounds the angels have inflicted," said Don. "Here in Vegas, preferably. The angels are likely to retaliate when they realize he's gone. If they're going to, we should make sure it's on our own turf."

"Can you ask Charon to book a suite for us at the Bellagio?" I asked Legion.

The Bellagio. Luke had asked me to marry him out in front of it, near the fountains. If we couldn't come back to the Inferno, it seemed like as good of a place as any.

"Of course," Legion said. "Consider it done."

"That just leaves an entry point." I turned back to Don. "How do four demons get into Heaven?"

Don winced. "There's a way... but you're not going to like it."

I wasn't surprised.

There wasn't anything about this I liked, but if it meant getting Luke back, that didn't matter.

All that mattered was him.

EVIE

We arrived outside of Paradise through a portal Don opened from the Abyss. The club looked full tonight. Beneath the neon palm trees and pink cursive lettering of the sign over the building, tourists and bachelors flowed in like hard liquor poured over ice.

“Will they even let us in, dressed like this? I feel like the Unabomber in this sweatshirt.” I asked as I put on the sunglasses Luke had given me once. He’d joked that they’d once belonged to Elvis. Something that the King of Rock ‘n Roll had thrown in as part of a bargain for fame at a crossroads.

That first morning we’d spent together felt like an entire lifetime ago. I supposed I was.

“We need to keep a low profile,” Don said, pulling on a plain black baseball cap. In jeans and a dark t-shirt, I’d never seen him so dressed down.

“It’s called the Gray Man,” Mal explained in his light Southern drawl. In a navy-blue zip-up hoodie and sneakers instead of his usual cowboy boots, he looked just as out of character as Don did. “We’re wearing nondescript clothing to blend in. Don’t wanna attract any more attention than we already will.”

“You don’t think four people dressed like undercover feds are going to attract attention?” I cast a glance at a group of frat boys in salmon pink

shorts and garish Hawaiian shirts. “This is Vegas, remember. We’d probably blend in more by standing out.”

“It’s no’ the crowd we’re trying tae blend in with tonight, lass.” Lock adjusted his own sunglasses, looking uncomfortable in his dark polo shirt. Normally, he looked every bit the proud Scottish warrior he was, but tonight he looked more like an accountant on a coke bender. “It’s the background we want to become. Besides.” He pulled on a windbreaker. “We need the long sleeves tae hide some of the smoke. You’re infernal too now, remember. When we go through those doors, ye should expect it to burn.”

I nodded, already bracing for it. “I’m ready, then. Let’s get this over with.”

The second we crossed over the threshold, I could feel the shift in reality. It really did feel like passing into a different realm. But while I could see Don, Mal and Lock all tense with discomfort, I was surprised to find I didn’t feel anything burning on my own skin.

I was a little warmer than usual, sure. But given how packed Paradise was tonight, it could have easily just been the heat of all the bodies grinding against each other amongst the gaggles of beautiful, winged angels who writhed to the beat of the music on the dance floor.

Maybe I wasn’t quite as infernal as everyone thought.

“We need tae work fast,” Lock murmured under his breath. He pointed to a hallway at the back of the club. “Down that way. Quick, before we’re seen.”

I grimaced. I’d been down that hallway before.

I hadn’t liked what I’d found at the end of it: my ex-fiancé, Adam, having an orgy with angelic beings on the night before I was supposed to become his bride.

Then again, that whole situation had turned out for the best in the end. Adam had always been wrong for me. It had taken that infidelity before I could finally see it.

Adam’s betrayal had led directly to my marriage to Luke.

Now, it was the man who was undeniably right for me that I needed to find at the end of that hall.

“They’ll be keeping him in one of the holding cells, I reckon,” Mal explained under his breath as our group moved through the crowd. “You should prepare yourself for it. He’s probably gonna be pretty roughed up.”

“I know.” I’d already come to that conclusion independently. Luke had been the enemies of the angels since nearly the beginning of time. Now that they had him right where they wanted him, I wouldn’t be surprised that they’d made him pay for all that he’d done. “Why are there holding cells in Heaven at all, though? If this is paradise, that’s a little off-brand, don’t you think?”

“It’s where they try to save sinners,” Don replied. He kept his head low and stuck close to my side. “They don’t want humans in Hell any more than they want demons there.”

“Then why did they create Hell to begin with, if they want it empty?” I still struggled to wrap my head around the cosmic conflict that my life had turn into. No matter how hard I tried, it never felt as cut and dry as I would have liked.

“They didn’t, lass. When Heaven was created, Hell sprung up as well,” said Lock. “As above, so below. But if they can empty Hell, they figure they won’t have any more opposition on Earth. They’ll be free to bend as many people to their will as they like.”

“As above, so below...” I repeated Lock’s words in a whisper. “If that’s true, emptying Hell would empty Heaven, too.”

“Now you’re getting it.” Don nodded in approval. “They’re working on flawed logic. They have been for some time now.”

“Who flawed it?” By now, I was getting used to the idea that everything I knew about angels was incorrect. I’d been raised to believe they were perfect beings of protection. It seemed like at some point something had gone wrong.

But what? When?

“We’re as curious as you are,” said Mal. “If we knew, we probably wouldn’t be here tonight at all.”

We made it to the mouth of the hallway safely. Smoke was rolling out from beneath the cuffs of the boys’ jackets and sweatshirts now, but so far, no one seemed to have noticed.

Good. The cleaner we entered into this situation, the easier it would be to get back out—this time, with Luke at our side, safe and sound.

“All right, lads.” Lock clapped his hands on Don and Mal’s shoulders. “Are ye ready for a wee rumble?”

As I looked between them through my Elvis glasses, I noticed a dark aura that surrounded each of them. A glance back at the dance floor

revealed that all of the winged dancers had a similar glow around their bodies, only theirs was bright and white.

I took my glasses off and looked at the boys again. Their auras were gone now. Maybe the glasses were smudged?

Or maybe, I thought as I cleaned the glasses on the edge of my sweatshirt, they were a little more than just Elvis sunglasses. It wasn't the first time I'd noticed the auras through them, but this was the first time I'd ever been presented with so much proof all at once.

Mal and Don nodded to each other and began rolling up their sleeves. More smoke poured off their bodies as they grinned and squared up to each other.

"Nothing below the belt buckle, you dumb hick," Don said to Mal with a smirk.

"Right, and you keep your hands off my wallet, city slicker." Mal chuckled, then formed his hands into fists. "Let's tussle."

Lock put an arm around my back and swept me down the hall as Mal and Don began to swing at each other. They looked like they were having the times of their lives, but a glance over my shoulder confirmed that Paradise's security was immediately concerned. Angels in white suits emerged from the edges of the room and began to make their way toward Don and Mal through the crowd.

"They're going to be all right, aren't they?" I asked as Lock and I left them behind. "I feel bad that they're having to beat the snot out of each other so we can get away unnoticed."

"Those two?" Lock laughed. "Aye. They're brothers, the two of them. This is far from the first time they've fought for a laugh—and most likely, it's far from the last, too."

"Brothers? Really?" Behind us, shouts and the sound of breaking glass began to build as the energy from Don and Mal's fight spread to the rest of the crowd. "I didn't realize demons had family, I guess."

"Half-brothers, technically, but aye." Lock nodded. "They share a mother. Did ye really not ken they were the bairns of Belial?"

I snorted as we moved down the hall. It turned sharply at one point and the lights got even darker.

I supposed it made sense, now that Lock mentioned it. Don and Mal weren't part of Luke's Fallen, but they'd always been in his circle of trust.

As sons of a fallen angel, it explained where they'd gotten so much power from.

"Poor Bea and Ava." I didn't envy them for the fallout that was probably going to come when Belial realized her sons were shacking up with humans. But I imagined if you asked the two of them, it probably explained where Don and Mal had gotten some of their sexual charisma as well.

"Ach. They'll be all right, I'm sure." Lock smirked. "It's your Joanie I'm more concerned about. Is she single, do ye ken?"

I looked up at him, bemused. "Is this really the time, Lock?"

"No, perhaps not." Lock shrugged as he paused to study one of the doors in this darker stretch of hallway, then shook his head and kept moving. "But I fancy her somethin' fierce, and this is the first I've been able to ask ye about it without her bein' there as well."

"Have the two of you, ah..." I didn't usually pry into Joan's sex life, which she tended to keep to herself, but I supposed before I answered any of Lock's questions about her, it was worth knowing how serious things were.

"Had a houghmagandie?" Lock guessed. "Lain together?"

"Yes. That."

"Oh, aye. A time or two. All that sparrin' together, ye ken. Gets the blood up, then one thing leads to another..."

"Right." So all my friends had been engaging in secret trysts with the men of Hell. My mouth twitched with a smile. That made a lot of sense, now that it was all out in the open. "Well, in that case, you should probably ask her if she's single yourself."

"Pssh. She'd box my ears in for even bringin' it up." Lock rubbed the back of his neck, studied another door, then scoffed. "Difficult lass to pin down, your Joanie. Course, once ye do..."

I held up a hand before Lock could reveal anything more. "*Lock.*"

"Right." Lock's cheeks bloomed into a gentle pink flush as he grinned. "I'm gonna do a quick scan of the rest of these doors. You stay here and keep an eye out for angels. Fair enough?"

I nodded to him, relieved that I didn't have to hear any more sex confessions. Joan would've hated him just for revealing what he already had.

"Fair enough."

Lock headed down the hall with purpose, touching his palm to each door he passed and shaking his head in disappointment as he failed to sense Luke behind them.

I looked back toward the way we'd come from, checking quickly for anyone who might disturb our search, and didn't find anyone.

For a moment, I closed my eyes and tried to seek Luke out as well.

My heart beat a little faster once my eyes were closed. At first, I thought it was anticipation, but then, as I'd hoped...

I felt him. I did. I couldn't tell where he exactly he was, only that he was close. I felt it in my belly, wound up in the tightness that had formed in my womb.

I felt it in my chest, too. A warmth and a light that I'd only known when Luke's lips had been pressed against mine.

It was enough to give me more hope than I'd felt in weeks.

Unless we failed tonight, in which case, it was enough to break my heart, too.

A throat cleared in front of me, and my eyes shot open again, expecting Lock.

Instead, I found myself staring down...

Myself.

What?

I blinked as I took in the sight of my own face. Those were my gray eyes staring back at me. My full lips, painted an ugly pink color that I knew better than to try and pull off. My thick blonde waves. My stupid nose.

But it wasn't my reflection.

A grayish aura surrounded her. Not white, not dark. Something strange in between.

It wasn't *me*.

"Ew," the other Evie said, sneering and stepping back. She was wearing high, strappy heels and a pink dress so tiny, I'd seen napkins with more fabric to them. "What are *you* doing here?"

"Huh?" There was a man at the other Evie's side. His arm was draped around her shoulders. He smelled like sugary-sweet booze. As he looked between us, his brow furrowed in confusion. "What the... You look familiar somehow..."

I took a step back, more stunned than ever.

It was Adam. My ex. The man who'd cheated on me, broken my heart and unwittingly put all of this in motion.

Which made the other Evie...

His wife. His *new* wife.

Up close like this, she looked even more like me than she had when the girls had shown me the wedding pictures on Adam's Instagram.

But as I'd suspected at the time, there was something not quite right about her. My Elvis glasses all but confirmed it.

Whatever she was, she wasn't angelic. She wasn't infernal.

In fact, I was beginning to suspect she wasn't even human.

"Move," said the other Evie. "You're in our way."

I tried to remember what this version of me was calling herself as she shoved me aside. Evangelina, maybe? Eva? I couldn't recall.

Whatever her name was, she certainly seemed eager to get Adam away from me. Not that I minded.

I would have been perfectly happy to never see his face again after what he'd done.

But Adam lingered behind, even as his new wife tried to drag him away.

"Don't I know you from somewhere?" he asked me.

I had to try hard not to laugh.

We'd been engaged once. I looked exactly like his new wife.

Had he really forgotten about me? I'd be glad if so.

Or maybe, some kind of curse—or blessing—was preventing him from recognizing my face.

"No," I said, at the same time the other Evie said, "Not a chance."

"Huh. Are you sure?" Adam reached for my glasses, but before he could grab them, I took a big step backward and the other Evie pulled him away.

The tension that had formed in my shoulders eased as I watched them both walk away.

Whatever was going on *there*, I wanted absolutely no part in it. I was glad the other Evie seemed to agree.

She had her man now, and I had no intention of trying to take Adam away from her.

All I wanted was to get my man back, too.

“Evie! Found him!” Lock’s voice called out from the other end of the hall. “Come quick. It’s... ah, shite. It’s bad. I’ll need your help.”

I gave one last glance to Adam and Other-Evie as they disappeared around the corner. Other-Evie turned as well, meeting my eyes. She looked around the corner for me, glanced back, and gave me a small thumbs-up.

Go. Her lips shaped the word soundlessly.

Wow. She really *was* eager to keep me away from Adam. But if I could trust her—I hoped I could—it was good news.

There weren’t any other angels coming our way.

We were safe. For now.

I turned to the sound of Lock’s voice and broke into a run. I found him snarling at a door at the end of the hall. His body was smoking more than ever. I knew he must be in pain.

Once again, I wondered why my skin wasn’t smoking too—but that was something we’d have to deal with later.

“What’s wrong?” I asked, placing a hand on Lock’s shoulder. I had to draw it away quickly, though. Even his clothing was searing hot to the touch.

“I can see him behind the door,” Lock panted. He took a few steps back and cracked his neck. “They’ve crucified him. Hurt him badly, too. Told him he should’ve never given the rat bastards those bloody nails.”

As the image of Luke nailed to a cross filled my mind, it felt like a nail had been driven into my heart as well.

“How do we get in?” I asked, my voice full of urgency.

“Only way I’ve ever gotten into anything,” Lock growled. “I’m battering the fuckin’ door down.”

Lock ran at the door and slammed against it with all his strength. When it failed to yield to him, he staggered back, took a breath, then did it again.

And again.

And again.

The skin on Lock’s cheeks was beginning to smolder. Little embers were burning holes through his jacket where more smoke could pour out.

He was in pain. He was doing his best to hide it, but I could see it.

And every time he rushed the door, it was getting worse.

“Stop,” I ordered him. “Let me try something.”

“I’m no lettin’ ye yerself, lass,” Lock said with a shake of his head. “If this door won’t break down for me, I don’t see what help yer wee body would be—no offense.”

“None taken,” I said as I moved between Lock and the door. “But I’m not going to try to break it down.”

“No? Then what?”

“I’m going to ask it to open for me.” It almost felt stupid to say it out loud, but it didn’t matter.

If Lock’s brutality wasn’t going to do the trick, maybe it required something else.

I wasn’t burning here. There was no telling why, but I was beginning to suspect that I had some kind of protection that the others didn’t.

I didn’t know who it came from. Maybe from within me. Maybe from above.

But the golden light that had glimmered around Luke and me when we’d kissed after saying our vows had felt like love. And as I tried to imagine holding Luke in my arms again, I felt that golden light return. It rippled through my chest and reverberated through my soul.

Something more powerful than angels and demons had smiled on Luke and me that night. It had wanted us to be together.

It had felt like love.

Maybe it was here with us now.

Maybe it would bring Luke back to me again.

I pressed my hand against the door. It had no handle. No lock to pick or force or break.

I rested my forehead against its smooth surface and thought of Luke. His scent, dark and earthy and rich. His kisses, always so fiery and passionate that they left my mouth warm long after he’d finally pulled away again.

I thought of the little life he’d placed in my womb. The future I’d imagined for us together. Husband and wife—and now, child as well.

Open for me, I begged the door and the light alike. *I want my husband back*.

And then, just like that, the door swung inward.

And behind it, as Lock had said—

There he was.

My Lucifer. My husband.

My Luke.

“Fuck,” I swore as I took him in. His head hung low, unconscious. His shoulders slumped forward beneath his weight. His arms were stretched across a dark, rough length of wood. Pearly blood dripped from the nails in his hands. More trickled down his bare feet—and from his chest, too, which looked like it had been cut with knives and stabbed with thorns.

I rushed to him, placing my hands against his cheeks. His skin burned, flushed and feverish beneath my palms.

“Luke.” I tried to make his eyes meet mine, but his lashes barely fluttered at the sound of my voice. “Luke, it’s Evie. It’s me.”

“The nails, lass.” Lock came in behind me and dropped to his knees as he reached for the one that pinned down Luke’s feet. “They’ve left him weak. We’ll need to get them out—then we need to get going. Mal and Don have the angels distracted for now, but that won’t last.”

I placed a kiss on Luke’s forehead, then moved to the nail in his left hand. It was buried deep, but as I twisted its head, I was pretty sure I could pull it out.

It took all of my strength, but finally, something gave way. Luke groaned in a quiet agony as the length of iron passed back through his skin.

“Evie?” He struggled to lift his head, but for a brief moment, his eyes opened and met mine. “Is it... is that really you?”

“Of course it is, you gorgeous asshole.” I handed the nail to Lock then moved to the other. “Who else would it be?”

“A trick.” Luke hissed, his face contorting with pain as Lock yanked the nail from his feet. Through that pain, Luke’s eyes sought mine again. “If you’re a trick, though... you’re a damn beautiful one, love.”

“I’m not a trick,” I assured him. “I’m your fucking wife.”

Luke slumped forward as I removed the last nail. Lock shifted up to catch him before he fell.

“If you’re my wife,” Luke mumbled, looking dazed, “then you’ll do me a favor, won’t you?”

I stared down at him, not sure whether to scowl at him or smile.

We’d only just rescued him, and he was already asking for favors?

He might not have been sure that I was me, but I was *certainly* sure that this was him.

No other man would have had the balls.

“What do you want, you silly man?”

Luke smirked, eyes only half open. He looked like he was struggling to stay conscious, but when his blues met mine, glinting with that wickedness I loved so much, suddenly I knew everything was going to be all right.

“Kiss me, love,” Luke whispered.

I couldn’t help but laugh.

“Don’t die on me before we get you out of this place,” I told him, raising a hand to his cheek. “And you can have as many kisses as you want.”

EVIE

“**Y**ou smell good,” Luke slurred in my ear as Lock and I hauled him back down the hall.

I’d never seen Luke drunk before. I supposed he still wasn’t now—just in enough pain that he seemed like he was.

If he hadn’t been shirtless, bleeding, half-dead and barely held up between my body and Lock’s, it might have even been kind of cute.

“Save it, handsome.” As much as I would have liked to entertain his compliments, this really wasn’t the time.

“Like the fucking ocean, love,” Luke mumbled anyway, disregarding my advice entirely. “That’s you. My Evie-ocean.”

“Ah, piss,” Lock swore. “Did they bash ye in the head too hard, ye old bastard? Talk sense or shut yer trap.”

“S’not brain damage,” Luke assured us through a dopey smile. “Just love.”

“Ugh.” Lock’s derision toward Luke was fond, but barely contained. “With you, what’s the difference ever been? No offense meant to ye, lass.”

“None taken.” If only I could have chalked Luke’s sacrifice up to brain damage.

Lock was right, though. It had been love and I knew it—but the two things didn’t always seem so different when you got right down to it.

Especially where Luke was involved.

Fuck. I really did love him.

I wouldn't have had it any other way.

"Sounds like the fight's still roaring on," Lock said with a nod up ahead as we rounded the corner. His cheeks were hollowed out into embers now. I could tell from the knit in his brow that it hurt.

There was only a small stretch of hall left to go before we were back out on the dance floor of Paradise.

If we were quick, and quiet, and clever about things, maybe Mal and Don's violent distraction would be enough.

But as soon as we stepped back out into the club, I realized what a silly hope that had been.

Nothing about our lives had ever been that easy before.

Of course it wasn't enough.

On the dance floor, angels were battling bachelor parties while the DJ played "Dancing Queen." An elderly tourist in a fanny pack had one of the beautiful seraphim exotic dancers by her long, blonde ponytail. The seraphim's wings flapped frantically as she tried to shake herself free.

Two of the club's security agents were desperately trying to pin down a furious-looking bride-to-be wielding a broken bottle of Grey Goose while her bridesmaids, who wore tank-tops that said, "We're What Happens In Vegas," gnawed at the angels' ankles and beat them with stiletto heels.

A man stumbled backward toward us, swearing and engulfed in a cloud of smoke. He turned to us, already swinging his fist with a punch at ready.

His knuckles stopped mere inches away from Lock's face.

"Oh," Don said with a laugh of relief when he realized who he'd been swinging for. His nose was bloody and already beginning to swell. One side of his sunglasses hung dangerously off one of his ears. The other half of them were nowhere to be found. "Good. It's you."

"You and Mal did this?" I nodded to the violence playing out on the dance floor beyond us.

"We sure did." Don smiled, pleased with himself. "Nothing like a couple of fighting demons to stir up trouble in Paradise."

"And where is the lad?" Lock asked, scanning the churning crowd. "We need to get out of here before the angels set the place right again."

"Fist-fighting a bachelor party, last I saw." Don squinted as he searched the crowd as well. "To be fair, they deserved it. They were getting handsy with the dancers when we walked in, anyway."

“Grab him and let’s go.” I looked for the exit that the bartender had shown us to the last time we’d been here. It was all the way across the room, but I was pretty sure we could make it there if Don and Mal didn’t mind throwing a few more punches on the way.

Don nodded. “You all go on. I’ll get him and meet you outside.” He paused before he turned to clap Luke on the shoulder. “Good have you back, Dawnstar.”

Luke gave Don another dopey grin in return, along with a weak thumbs-up. “I’ll be here all week.”

“No, you won’t be.” I looked to Lock. “Can you carry him? I’m afraid his knees are going to go out any second now.”

“Aye. But it won’t feel nice.”

“I’m not sure that’s something we can avoid right now,” I pointed out.

“Got me there, lass.” Lock dropped a shoulder and took Luke across his back in a fireman’s carry. If it hurt Luke, he didn’t make any mention of it.

“Pretty eyes,” Luke said to me through a lopsided smile. He reached out to stroke my cheek and missed it by about a foot.

Ugh.

No man had any right to be this cute while in this much pain.

Least of all a man who already looked like Luke.

Lock and I fell into step with each other as we headed for the exit. If Don could recover Mal and they could make their way out unharmed—or, at least, without any significant stab wound from that bottle of Grey Goose that bride was swinging around—we could chalk this up to a completely successful rescue mission.

I was already imagining how nice it would be to get Luke into our bed at the suite in the Bellagio—at least, until a figure stepped in front of us again.

“I know you.” Adam’s brow was furrowed in frustrated confusion as he blocked our path. He reached out to me, trying to take my hand. “I know I do. Why I don’t I remember? Tell me who you are.”

“Oi. Step off, lad.” Lock pressed a hand against Adam’s chest and pushed him away from me as I took a step back. “Ye don’t ken her. Go bother someone else.”

I didn’t want Adam to touch my hand. Not only because I never wanted any part of him to ever touch any part of me again after what he’d done...

But I was worried, too.

Whatever had made Adam forget me was a blessing for us both, as far as I was concerned.

A blessing I was afraid would be broken if he ever touched me again.

Lock's shove only made Adam's frown deepen, though. There was anger in his eyes now.

That was an unfortunate thing. For him. Even with Luke slung across his shoulders, Lock had a good five inches on my ex and a warrior's physique to boot. Adam, on the other hand, had always had a deep aversion to the gym. I'd once seen him nearly knock himself out playing a test-your-strength punching game in a dive bar. When we'd lived together and he couldn't get a jar open, *he* had always handed it to *me*.

But I could tell from the look on Adam's face that none of this was registering to him right now. He was being affected by the demon battle mojo that Don and Mal had infected the club with. That much was obvious.

Either that, or he really just didn't know how to pick his battles.

"I'll bother whoever I like," Adam insisted, puffing up his chest and forming a fist with his hand.

My eyes darted to the door. It was so close, I could almost taste freedom.

But if Lock ended up fighting Adam, Luke might end up hurt in the process. And with Don and Mal lost in the crowd...

All that left was me.

"Fuck off," I told him, stepping in front of Lock. "I don't know you, and you don't know me. If you want to pick fights, you need to look elsewhere."

"I *do* know you," Adam insisted. He didn't uncurl his fist, but his eyes were suddenly pleading. "Tell me why. Tell me your name."

"Move," I told him. "Or I'll move you myself."

"Evie..." Lock warned—but it was already too late.

Adam's lips pulled back in a snarl as he grabbed my shoulder. I pulled it out of his grasp as quickly as I could—but it just wasn't quick enough.

His eyes widened with sudden recognition.

"What? ...Evie?" He looked more confused than ever now.

"Adam!" The other Evie rushed to Adam's side through the crowd. Her tiny dress had been torn at the skirt all the way up to her hip at some point

in the fight occurring around us. There was broken glass in her hair and a swollen split in her lower lip. “What are you doing?”

“Evie...” Adam looked between me and his new wife. “Evie?”

“You *bitch*,” Other-Evie snarled at me. There was hate in her eyes. Eyes that were exactly the same as mine. “What did you do?”

“Nothing,” I promised her. “We’re only trying to leave.”

But as I saw a pair of white wings approaching us from out of the corner of my eye, I realized that Irish goodbye to Paradise was no longer in our cards.

It looked like Paradise’s guardian angels had finally managed to fight off those ankle-biting bridesmaids after all.

“*Fuck*,” one of the angels snarled, pointing at us. “They’re getting away!”

“I’ll get the adversary, you grab the Lilith,” the taller of the two angels barked at his companion.

The shorter angel blinked, then grabbed the taller angel’s wrist. “Er. Which one is the Lilith again?”

They looked between Other-Evie and me in mutual bemusement.

Incredible. They were as just as confused as Adam was.

“It’s her,” said Other-Evie, pointing at me and looking triumphant. “She’s the Lilith. I’m the Eve.”

Lock and I exchanged a sudden, panicked glance.

“I’m the Eve,” I blurted out. “She’s a liar. Adam...” It felt dirty to do it, but if we were going to get Luke out of here alive—if we were going to get out at *all*—I didn’t have a choice. I looked to my ex-fiancé with soft, heartbroken eyes. “Can’t you tell it’s me?”

“Wuh...” Adam scratched his head, dumbfounded. He looked at Other-Evie. He looked at me. “I... I don’t know. I’m not sure.”

“You don’t know who your own wife is?” the taller angel scoffed. “This is ridiculous. Let’s take them both just to be sure. The adversary’s injured, and he can’t return to Hell anyway.”

“The Lilith is the priority now,” the other agreed.

Nodding in unison, both angels began making their way to Other-Evie and me.

“Wait! No!” Adam stepped in front of me, shielding me with his body. He nodded to Other-Evie. “Take her. She’s the fake one. This one is real.”

“You *bastard!*” Other-Evie shrieked at Adam as the angels shrugged at each other and moved to grab her wrists.

“Go,” I whispered to Lock, pushing him toward the doors. “Before they realize their mistake.”

As we rushed for the exit, I glanced back at Adam. He didn’t seem to have noticed yet that we were slipping away behind his back.

I almost felt bad about it, but then again...

He *had* cheated on me in an angelic, coke-fueled orgy the night before we were supposed to be married. Here in this very club, no less.

As far as I was concerned, he owed me one.

I broke into a run and shoved the door of the exit open. I held it for Lock as he came through.

Out on the street, the tires of our limo screeched to a halt as Charon pulled up for us. We raced towards it. Halfway there, I heard the door open again. A glance over my shoulder revealed Don and Mal, both smoldering with blood on their faces, stumbling forward with their arms around each other’s shoulders. Both were laughing as they ran our way.

At least they looked like they’d had fun.

“You should really cut your hair, pretty thing.” Luke reached for my waves as Lock lowered his feet back onto the ground once more. Again, he missed. By a lot. “You know you never liked having it this long.”

I smiled at him as I opened the door for the limo. “We can talk about that later, handsome. Right now, I think we need to go.”

“You can say that again,” Don panted as he came up behind us. “The archangel just arrived.”

I looked to the skies. As I caught sight of a flutter of majestic wings, I knew it was true.

We’d more than worn out our welcome here.

If there was ever a time to hightail it out of this joint, it was now.

Don and Mal took Luke beneath his arms and dragged him into the backseat of the limo. Lock ushered me in behind them with a hand at my back, then crawled into the limo himself.

As soon as the door was closed, Charon hit the gas. Out the back window, I peered at the outside of Paradise just in time to see Michael touch down.

From the exit we’d escaped from, more angels were pouring out. For a moment, they looked like they intended to take flight and follow us—but

then, to my surprise, Michael held up a hand, stopping all of them in their tracks.

He was staring at the taillights of the limo. I knew he couldn't see inside through the tinted windows, but nonetheless, I couldn't help but feel like he was looking right at me.

There was something glittering in his gaze that unsettled me more than anything else ever could have.

We'd succeeded at our heist of Paradise. We'd rescued Luke. We'd gotten away with only a few minor injuries—none of my own.

By all accounts, we'd won.

But that look in Michael's eyes...

I couldn't shake the feeling that despite our victory, somehow, we'd still managed to lose.

LUKE

Good God, she was pretty.
Loveliest thing I'd ever known.

The pain was real. My entire body ached with it so badly, it was hardly even worth paying attention to anymore. At a certain point, agony had tipped over into acceptance. It was like that sometimes: when you hurt more than you could bear, you gave yourself up to it until it almost didn't hurt anymore at all.

Instead, I focused on her. The feeling of her thighs beneath my cheek as she pulled my head into her lap. The angle of her jaw, heart-shaped. Staring up at her through my hazy vision from below, she looked more like a goddess now than ever.

Then, she looked down. She saw me smiling up at her.

And through the worry in her eyes, she didn't seem able to help it.

She smiled back.

"I thought I'd lost you again, you know," she said softly. Her fingertips brushed across my brow, pleasantly cool. A benediction. "I was terrified that I was right this time. That I'd lost you for good."

"Oh, love." I closed my eyes, still smiling as I relished her touch. "You'll never lose me. You can't."

As the limo rumbled beneath us, I must have finally drifted back out of consciousness.

When I finally opened my eyes again, the rumbling had finally stopped.

“Where are we, love?” I slurred sleepily. I tried to sit up, only to discover that I couldn’t.

It hurt to try. Hurt even more to try again.

“We’re at the Bellagio. I had Charon book us a suite.” Evie held the sunglasses I’d given her on our first morning together in her hands. She unfolded them, then slipped them on over my eyes. “I don’t think you can walk on your own, so... are you familiar with *Weekend at Bernie’s*?”

“I don’t know any Bernies, no.” I squinted up at her. She was shimmering like the fucking sun. “Is that a Vermont thing?”

Evie laughed. A beautiful sound. The ringing of bells. “We’re going to carry you up to the room. If anyone stops us, play drunk.”

“Mm.” I smiled again as I stared up at her through the aviator’s frames. She was glowing through them with the most perfect, rich light. “You’re golden, Evie. My golden bride.”

She smirked. “Yeah. Just like that.”

Distantly, I was aware of my body being lifted up. When I turned my head to one side, I saw Malacoda’s face. Like a desperado. A stranger coming to town. He had a fat lip and a split in his brow to complete the effect. All he was missing was the six-shooter and a horse with no name.

To my other side, there was Abaddon. Sleek and classically handsome, like an old-timey advertising man. One who had just been in a bar fight.

Between them, they hauled my body out of the limo and towards the Bellagio’s front doors.

“Nice of you to come rescue me, lads.” My bare feet struggled to mimic movement as they dragged me along. “Hope you haven’t decided to become good Samaritans in my absence.”

Mal scoffed. “Oughta give you a shiner for making so much work for us.”

“Don’t worry, Dawnstar,” Don said with a dark chuckle. “We won’t forget how badly you owe us one.”

“Aw.” I continued to smile, letting my feet drag uselessly behind me. “So, you do love me.”

“Pff. We just couldn’t let the angels keep kicking your sorry arse to death before we had our turn.” Lock moved up ahead of us with Evie at his side.

She glowed so bright now, she almost canceled out the dark aura that Lock emanated.

Briefly, I wondered what color I glowed now.

I wondered why I was seeing colors at all.

“We’re going to get you inside and get you to bed.” Evie shot Lock a dirty look. “If you deserve any beatings from anyone once that’s sorted out, they’ll have to wait until you’re—”

“Hey! What’s going on here?” a gruff male voice called out to us.

“—healed,” Evie grumbled.

With great effort, I raised my head to the source of the voice.

A beat cop was standing between us and the Bellagio’s front doors. His hands were on his hips as he surveyed our little group.

“What happened to him?” the cop asked, nodding to me. “Where’s his shirt?”

I raised my eyebrows and looked between Mal and Don.

One of them should probably try explaining.

I wasn’t really in any state to be laying the basics of Heaven/Hell politics out to anyone right now, least of all the fine boys in blue of the Las Vegas Police Department.

Instead, I did my best to look drunk. Wasn’t exactly hard.

“I’m so sorry, officer. This is my husband,” Evie explained. “He’s... ah, a little drunk.”

“Sláinte!” I slurred, giving the officer two flimsy thumbs-up.

“We’re just trying to get him back up to the room.” Evie stepped forward and lowered her voice. “We’re taking him to rehab in the morning. I’m so embarrassed—we didn’t mean to cause you any alarm.”

I bit back a laugh. She really was a very good liar when she needed to be. As always, she did me proud.

“Is that so?” The officer moved past Evie. His eyes were focused on me. “You feeling all right, son?”

“Oh, top notch. Just a *little* too much tequila tonight.” I gave him a grin as I checked him for a glow—maybe everyone glowed now? If those damn angels had given me brain damage, I was going to be very cross.

He wasn’t glowing at all, though. Only Evie and Lock and Mal and Don.

Interesting.

The cop narrowed his eyes.

“Someone hit you, son? A little too hard, maybe?” He cocked his head to the side. “Or did you come by that accent honestly?”

“As honestly as anyone does.” I shrugged. As much as I *could* shrug right now. “Fell down some, ah... some stairs.”

“Some *stairs*, huh?” At my lie, the officer seemed more suspicious than ever. “Uh-huh. Yeah. I’ve heard that one before.” He looked between the others, then lowered his voice to a whisper directed my way. “You feel safe with these people, son?”

I laughed, then nodded. “I do. They’re friends. And even if they weren’t...”

“I think we’ll be getting the lad up to bed now, officer.” Lock stepped in and ruffled my hair fondly. “As ye can see, he’s had a touch too much tonight. Best let him sleep it off before he goes getting any more wild ideas, eh?”

Placated for the moment, the officer nodded and stepped aside.

Into the Bellagio we went.

“That went well,” I mumbled as Mal and Don dragged me through the doors.

“Nearly got ourselves arrested,” Lock said with a harsh laugh. “Just like old times.”

“You four have done things like this before?” Evie sounded genuinely concerned.

“Wish you could remember, love.” I chuckled and my head hurt and the lobby around us spun in circles. “You were usually in on it as well.” I stared up at her through the sunglasses as her glow became so bright and golden, it nearly hurt my eyes. “Why didn’t you tell me these sunglasses I gave you lets you see mystical auras?”

“What?” Evie’s brow furrowed in confusion. “Is that what those are?”

“I can only assume. Lock and Mal and Don are dark.” I sighed, tired but relieved. “And you’re golden. Pretty thing.”

“I’ve... seen things through them before,” Evie admitted. “But there was always so much going on around it, I always forgot to ask you what they meant.”

“Could be useful in the future,” I told her as Lock went to the front desk to check us in. “It’s good to know we can always count on good old Elvis to show us the way. Especially here in Vegas.”

“They really are his glasses, aren’t they?” Evie placed a hand against my cheek and the pain in my body narrowed to a single pinprick as I was bathed in her light. “Walk like an angel... Devil in disguise.”

I laughed at her paraphrasing of the song lyrics, but that quickly turned to coughing, then to the taste of blood in my mouth.

It was a bad sign.

EVIE

Don and Mal laid Luke on the bed of our suite. As soon as his body hit the mattress, he turned his head and coughed blood.

He'd been so strong and so stoic this whole time, it'd been difficult to tell exactly how much he'd been suffering. But as we'd brought him up to the suite, his pain had become more and more apparent.

"He looks even worse now." I looked to Lock, who seemed the most likely to have answers about this kind of thing. "We rescued him. Why is he only getting worse?"

"He's out of his realm, lass." Lock crossed his arms over his chest. "Not that we had any choice but to steal him away from it. If we'd left him there, who knows what the angels would have done to him next."

"What do we do?" I looked to Don and Mal as well. They were lesser demons, where Lock was an actual fallen angel, but even they knew more about all of this than I did right now.

"I don't s'pose Luke taught you how to heal?" Mal asked, looking grim.

"It should be part of the infernal powers you inherited with your new... *position*." Don nodded in encouragement. "When Dawnstar was the devil, he mended my wounds more times than I could count. Now that you've taken his place, you might be able to heal his as well."

"But that was when you and Luke were both infernal," Lock reminded Don. He looked to me again and sighed. "Even if ye can heal, lass, I dinnae

ken that it would work on an angel. Luke is a being of Heaven again now. All of this... it's unprecedented, to say the least."

A long silence followed.

Then, I sat down on the bed next to Luke and placed my hand on his knee. He didn't stir.

"I have to try," I told the others. "Don't I?"

The three of them shared a look, then each gave me a nod.

"I reckon if ya don't, he'll only keep wastin' away here," said Mal.

"And returning him to Heaven to heal isn't an option," Don added. "For obvious reasons."

"We can try and lend ye strength, lass. If ye think it'll help," Lock offered. "But I don't want ye to push yerself too hard, and I want even less for ye to feel guilty if it's not in the cards. If you fail—and ye might—we'll have to look into other options." Lock glanced to Mal. "Don't s'pose the Greeks would want to be of any help in this? The Norse, maybe?"

"Hades might. He and Luke have always been on good terms. But he hasn't been seen in a long time." Mal said with a shrug. "And Odin's always been a fair hand as a healer... but you know how the Æsir are. They're weak enough as it is these days. Don't like meddlin' in other pantheons, neither. They've got more drama than you can shoot an arrow at among their own."

"The Fair Folk? Oberon?" Don suggested.

Lock grunted. "Making deals with the fae isnae something I'd want to turn to unless it was an absolute last resort."

"At least let me give it a shot before we start seriously talking about appealing to other gods," I said. I was still struggling to wrap my head around the politics of Heaven and Hell. Even if Luke and Hades *were* buddy-buddy together, I didn't want to complicate things even more by bringing other powerful beings into the equation. "I want to do this if I can. But... how do you lend me your strength?"

"Like this," Lock said. He placed his hand on the top of my head. My scalp prickled, tickling as I felt something staticky trickle down from his palm through my skin.

The sensation was amplified as Mal and Don placed each placed a hand on one of my shoulders.

Suddenly, any feelings of nausea that were lingering in my stomach were gone. The flame in my womb flickered, growing stronger than ever,

and my hands felt incredibly warm. My soul felt sturdy and full of light.

“Feel it?” Mal asked.

“Yes,” I breathed, closing my eyes. “I really do.”

With all three of their powers surging through me, I didn’t even have to open my eyes to see Luke’s form there on the bed. The outline of his body was a brilliant, glimmering white. The color of angelic auras, if Luke’s sunglasses theory was to be believed.

It was yet another reminder of Luke’s sacrifice. When we’d been married, we’d been human and devil. Now, we were devil and angel. Even now that he was back within my reach again, fate was still finding ways to keep us apart.

I wouldn’t let that stop me, though.

I may have been Queen of Hell now, but Luke was still my husband. Angel or not.

Within the glowing white outline of Luke’s body, I saw the places where he was hurt the most. The wounds on his palms and feet were a blistering red neon. Another flash of crimson was splashed across his ribs on one side. When I moved my hand to his chest, I saw the outline of my own fingers, glowing gold.

That was... odd. If I was really infernal, I should have glowed darkly like Don and Mal and Lock.

Yet another mystery. Not one that I had time to solve right now, though.

Luke’s final injuries were also on his chest. He had a stab wound in his other side. At a glance earlier, it had seemed small and insignificant, but now I could see how deep it ran. His pectorals had been slashed several times, these ones shallower. The broken nose he was currently sporting didn’t glow red at all, but there was a flicker of scarlet across his temple that worried me.

A head wound. Maybe a concussion, though it was impossible to determine what had caused it.

“I can see where he’s hurt,” I told the others, eyes still closed. “Not all of his injuries are visible to the naked eye, and not all of the ones that we can see are the ones that are hurting him.”

“It’s the wounds inflicted by objects of power that we have to worry about,” said Don. “Those are probably the ones you’re able to see now.”

“How bad off is he, lass?” asked Lock. “Tell us true.”

“Pretty bad,” I said with a sigh. “But I think I can do this.”

At least, I wanted to.

At least now I knew where to place my hands.

Luke had healed my body once. I still carried the memory of the comforting warmth his touch had brought to my skin. He’d caressed my body with love. Adoration. Worship.

Maybe that was the key. Luke had told me once that the powers of the gods were dependent on belief. On love.

And there was no one that I believed in or loved more than him.

“I love you, Luke.” I placed my golden hand over his pearly one, covering up the red glow of his wound. “I should have said it a long time ago. I’m sorry I didn’t. But I’m saying it now. I love you, and I want you to come back to me. Healed and whole.”

I caressed his skin and imagined the power inside me flowing over the place where the nail had pierced his skin. I envisioned it cleaning the wound like cool, fresh water. In my mind’s eye, I let my love for Luke flow into his injury as the water washed it clean.

“Go on, lass,” Lock urged me with a whisper. “I think it’s working.”

Beneath my hand, I could feel Luke’s energy too. It was waning, but as I poured my love into him, his aura hummed, shimmering a little brighter.

When I moved my hand away, the red glow on his palm was gone.

“I love you,” I breathed, grabbing his other hand with both of mine. I clasped his palm tight in my fingers. “I’ve always loved the way you’ve treated me. You’ve protected me from everything you could, across so many lifetimes. Even when you were up against the impossible. Even when it hurt.”

He was glowing brighter than ever now. His aura chimed with the sound of a wet finger running around the rim of a crystal wine glass.

The other wound on his hand slowly faded away.

I moved to his feet next. It seemed like the power inside me should have been waning as I emptied it into him, but if anything, I felt stronger than ever now.

I didn’t know if it was the love that Lock, Mal and Don had for Luke giving me extra doses of strength, or if it was just the love Luke and I shared, amplifying. Reverberating. Bouncing between us and healing anything that stood in its path.

I had a feeling it was probably a little bit of both.

“When you kiss me, it feels like the entire universe is exploding against my lips.” I let my words wash over Luke along with the power and all the love as I ran my hand down the top of his left foot. “When you hold me, it feels like everything’s coming together, finally, after so long of being broken apart.”

I moved my hand to his other foot. I could tell from the size of the wound that when the nail was driven through his feet, this was the one that had been on top.

“And when I look at you,” I told him, “I see a future for us. One that I want. One that I *need*, Luke. Now, more than ever. Come back to me. I believe in you. I believe in *us*. I love you. Come back to me so you can finally hear me say it. Please.”

“It’s helping.” Mal sounded equal parts shocked and in awe. “I can see it. Quick, Evie. Do up the rest.”

“Demons healing angels.” Don gave a brief chuckle. “*There are more things in Heaven and Earth, Horatio...*”

My chest was vibrating with energy. It gushed over Luke’s body, molten gold mixed with black oil, as I passed my hand over the cuts on his pecs. The red glow on his temple didn’t look as bad now, but the crimson over his ribs looked angrier than ever.

It felt like the energy I was pouring into Luke was helping him heal himself, too. It was redirecting its efforts to the most essential places now.

I followed its lead and pressed my palm to the side of Luke’s head.

“I love you, you stubborn, perfect bastard.” I dipped my lips down to brush against his. “You’re mine and I’m yours. You’re going to be okay, and I’m never going to lose you again after this. However we have to make this work, we will.”

My mouth crushed against Luke’s as I forced the full flow of the power into the wound on his head. For a moment, nothing happened—then Luke groaned in pain against my lips.

When the sounds of his agony had faded, to my amazement, he kissed me back.

“That hurt like a bitch,” Luke grunted through his teeth, panting. “But you’re an angel, love.”

“No,” I said, positioning my hand against Luke’s ribs. The final piece of this puzzle. The last thing we had left to heal. “I’m most definitely not. Now hold still—if you thought that was bad, *this* is gonna hurt like hell.”

I moved my hands to Luke's ribs, and he hissed.

"I love you, Luke," I said one last time, gathering up all the strings of power within me. They felt limitless. It was only as I spoke the words that I realized Lock, Don and Mal had all pulled their hands away. "I need you to know that."

"I've always known, love," Luke mumbled back to me.

My breath caught in my throat. I didn't dare open my eyes yet, lest the spell be broken, but if I could have, I would have stared at him in surprise. "You have?"

"Course. Always." Luke chuckled, then cleared his throat. "And I need you to know that I'm excited to be a father. Sweet of you, really, to bring me back with the gift of something new to love."

I furrowed my brow. I still hadn't figured out how to tell Luke yet. I'd been waiting until he was healthy and conscious again, at the very least.

But apparently, Luke had already figured it out himself.

"You're happy, then?" I caressed his ribs but held the power back. I knew as soon as I unleashed it, he was going to hurt all over again.

I wanted just a moment with him before I sullied it by inflicting more pain.

"Why wouldn't I be?" Luke rasped. "Aren't you?"

"I am," I said softly. The flame in my belly purred with delight. "But... how did you know?"

"I'll tell you all about it once you've finished fixing me up," Luke promised. His hand curled over mine, pressing my fingertips firmly against the red glow over his ribs. "But suffice to say... it was more than just a devil of a guess."

EVIE

The next few days passed like winter fading into spring. Luke was unconscious for most of them, but his condition improved with every morning.

In his few lucid moments, his only interest was holding me in his arms.

“I know you must have questions, love,” he mumbled sleepily against my hip on the first morning. “I have a few of my own, truth be told.”

I smoothed his dark hair down over the back of his head. “We can talk when you’re ready, handsome. I’m just glad to have you back.”

“Mm. That’s gracious of you.” He hummed with pleasure at my touch. “I appreciate the chance to get my head together. You must think me some kind of dim-witted fool for the way I’ve been.”

“I don’t know.” I smiled down at him. “Maybe I like my sleepy, dopey, cuddly husband.”

“And I like my golden wife.” His hand moved to my stomach. “My golden child.”

“You promise that you’re—” *Happy*, I wanted to say, but I felt Luke’s head get heavy on my thigh before I could finish.

He was asleep again.

He’d been gone from me for such a short time, but in those scarce days, he’d been hurt badly enough that I couldn’t begrudge him the chance to rest.

For the most part, our allies kept their distance. Only Lock visited, and even then, only in disguise.

“Nice fake mustache,” I told him a few days later as I opened the door. He was wearing a thick false one over his real one, deep brown and curled up at the ends like it belonged to a silly character in a play.

“Ach, I’m just tryin’ tae keep a low profile, is all. Don’t need the angels figuring out where yer holed up.” Lock peered around me to look at Luke, who was asleep on the bed with one arm draped across his own chest. Out cold. “How is he?”

“Improving. Slowly, but he’s better every time he wakes up.” I brushed my hair behind my ear and frowned. “I thought the healing took. But he obviously needs something more than that.”

It was my one shame about Luke’s healing. I’d hoped that he’d be back to his old self immediately. But obviously, I hadn’t done enough.

“Yer still infernal, lass. He’s still an angel. Some of his wounds might be beyond the reach of your new powers.”

“But I’ve checked.” I had. When I called the powers to life and closed my eyes, I hadn’t found anything left to heal. “There’s no more glowing red on his body. Everything physical that I can mend, I’ve already mended it.”

“Ah. Well...” Lock rubbed the back of his neck and gave me a tense smile. “Maybe it’s no’ his body that’s the thing hurting now. Maybe it’s something...deeper, ye ken.”

“You think I need to try to heal... what? His soul?” I blinked, taken aback. I hadn’t even considered that yet.

“Er... well.” Lock’s smile widened. A flush rose to his cheeks. “I was thinking a wee roll in the heather might be more prudent, but ye make a compelling point. Then again, the two might be not be quite so different, eh?”

“That’s... definitely an interesting idea, at least.” I couldn’t pretend that making love to Luke wasn’t a tantalizing option. “Do you think he’s well enough for that, though?”

I cast a glance back over my shoulder. Over the last seventy-two hours, Luke had been unconscious more than he’d been awake. I knew from the way he thrashed in his sleep at night that he was having nightmares. They were a kind that I couldn’t wake him from, no matter how hard I tried.

All I could do was hold him until his body went quiet again. All I could do was wait for the terrors in his mind to fade.

“Not tae be too forward, lass, but, ah...” Lock laughed, suddenly sounding uncomfortable. “I’ve heard how he talks of ye. In more lifetimes of yours than I’d like tae admit, I’ve heard how the two of ye go at it, too. Like a wild stallion and a broodmare.”

“Um. Thanks, I think?”

Lock brightened. “Aye. Meant it as a compliment. All I’m saying is, he loves ye. Ye love him. And he needs ye more than ever. Speaking from strictly personal experience on the matter, mind... a lad could overcome an awful lot for the promise of the body of a lass. Particularly that of a lass he loves.”

The idea still surprised me a little, but I wasn’t ready to count it out just yet.

Not until I’d given it a shot, at least.

“How’s everything else holding up?” I asked, trying not to look too hard at Lock’s fake mustache. It really was too ridiculous for words.

“The rest of the Fallen still don’t ken anything,” Lock assured me. “The angels have been sweeping Vegas for clues to yer man’s whereabouts, but they’ve found naught. Oh, and Charon is house-training The Beast, ye should be glad to know.”

“Good.” Any amount of training Charon wanted to give The Beast before we could return to Hell, I was grateful for. I wasn’t ready to deal with the Fallen until Luke was back to his old self so he could whip them into shape, and the absence of any angels on our trail meant I’d have time to get Luke to that point. “And you, Mal and Don are keeping my family and friends safe?”

“Aye. I’ve been tagging along with Joanie when she goes above. Mal’s got Ava covered, and Don has Bea. Much to her utter delight and feigned chagrin, mind.” Lock gave me a wink.

A tiny laugh escaped my lips. “She’s working awful hard to resist his charms, isn’t she?”

“Only on the outside,” Lock assured me, chuckling as well. “On the inside, though—I fear she’s a goner, and him along with her.”

It made my heart warm to hear it. I knew Bea had a lot of difficulties when it came to the future of her love life, especially with her wedding on the way. But maybe her husband-to-be would understand.

It was only an arranged marriage, after all. Not a love match.

I wanted Bea and Don to be happy. Especially if that meant being happy together. It was hard not to keep holding out hope that somehow, they'd get there.

"And my parents?" I asked.

"Legion's watching over them." Lock laughed again. "And they're watching over her as well. Yer ma grounded her yesterday, if ye can believe it. No dessert for a week because she caught the poor lass trying to light up a smoke in the bathroom."

"Oh, god." I raised my hand to my lips to conceal my smile. "Legion must hate that."

"I think she's considering going off the smokes, actually." Lock shrugged. "She says that mother of yers makes a fine blueberry pie. Worth trading addictions for, even."

"Good for her." I laid a hand on Lock's arm. "Thank you, Lock. Thank you all. For everything."

"No thanks necessary." Lock waved my words away. "Ye want tae repay us, you get that man of yers back to his auld self. Then, we'll all be square."

As Lock turned to go, I closed the door behind him.

Slowly, I pivoted on my toes to look at Luke again.

He was serene now. No thrashing. He looked every bit the angel I knew he was. The angel he'd always been, deep down.

But as a furrow crossed his brow, I knew that Lock was right on at least one count.

I needed to bring him back. Properly, this time. Not just in body and in health, but in soul, too.

And if that meant trying what Lock had suggested...

I untied the silk kimono that Lock had brought for me with the rest of my clothes a few days ago. Beneath it, I wore a satiny slip, devil red.

"Luke," I whispered as I crawled into bed next to him. I moved my fingertips across his brow, and slowly, he stirred.

"Love." His voice was full of exhausted relief. His hands moved for my shoulders, trying to pull me down next to him so he could cuddle me up once more. "Come here... Let me hold you again."

"You can hold me. But not there."

Luke's eyes cracked open into thin, curious slits. "No?"

I took his hands from my shoulders and moved them to my hips. “Hold me here instead.”

One of Luke’s dark brows arched with interest. His eyes opened a little wider. “Is that where you’d like to be held, now?”

“Yes. It is.” I shifted onto my knees and pulled my nightie up so Luke’s hands would slip down its fabric and onto my skin instead. “And there... that’s even better.”

“My Evie.” Luke moved to me, burying his face in my lap. “Beautiful, perfect creature.”

I wasn’t wearing any panties. Luke’s nose dipped into the golden curls of my pubic hair. Warmth flooded between my thighs.

That should have been all it took.

But Luke’s eyes were still so tired, and as he nuzzled my cunt with the tip of his nose, he was far too innocent. Far too close to drifting back off to sleep.

“No, darling. Stay awake for me.” I took his face in my hands and turned it back up toward mine. “I need you, Luke. I need you awake. I need you to be yourself again. I need you to be *mine*.”

“I am yours, love. But...” Luke’s blues met my grays for a moment, then he closed his eyes shut tight once more. “I’m sorry. I don’t know if I can.”

“Your body is healed, Luke.” I ran one of my thumbs across his cheek, frowning. “I’ve checked everything. Unless...” A horrible thought struck me. It was a dagger in my ribs just to entertain it. “Do you not want me anymore?”

Luke laughed. It was a genuine sound, but it was ragged with pain. Pain from where, I still didn’t know. “Don’t be ridiculous. I’d want you on my deathbed, love. You’re the kind of woman who’s impossible not to want.”

“You *are* on your deathbed, Luke.” How did he not see it? His body was whole again, but there was still something wrong. Something that I couldn’t reach, no matter how hard I tried.

I knew this might have been my last chance to fix it. Maybe my only chance.

“I know, love. I feel it.” He took my hand and guided it down his body beneath the blankets until it rested against his cock.

I nearly gasped. “You’re hard.”

“Hard not to be, with the smell of your wet cunt in my nose like this.” He smiled up at me, but there was sadness in his eyes. “As I said. Even on my deathbed, I want you. But I *am* dying, Evie. I died a thousand times nailed to that cross in that cell you found me in. And here, now, with you. Yes. I’m dying still.”

I was struggling to understand whether Luke was speaking in metaphors, or if he meant it. If there really was some damage from the wounds the angels had inflicted on him still lurking inside his body, I wanted to fix it.

But that look in his eyes...

My chest cracked inward. Suddenly, my body felt like glass.

Maybe this was something that couldn’t be fixed.

“Tell me what’s wrong,” I begged him, and he sighed.

“I made a vow, love. A vow that couldn’t be broken. I promised to give myself over to Heaven willingly and stay there so that you would be safe.” He moved his own hand to my belly, caressing it beneath my slip. “Our child, too. Though, there was no way of knowing that at the time.”

“You didn’t break it, though,” I pointed out. “You held up your end of the bargain. You went to Heaven. You didn’t try to leave. We took you away. It’s not exactly like they left you in a position where you were able to walk out on your own.”

“And for a few blissful hours, I thought you might’ve succeeded,” Luke murmured. “You’re my anchor. You and the baby both. I thought maybe, with the way you were glowing golden—”

“You saw that too?” Luke had called me golden several times on the night of his rescue, but honestly... I’d kind of assumed that he was either too out of it to put together a more coherent compliment, or that maybe he’d been talking about my hair.

“You’ve got love wrapped around you like a fur cape, pretty girl. The love of the Almighty Himself.” Luke shook his head. “I thought maybe it meant that the love between us was enough. But now...” He took my other hand and placed it against his chest. There, right in the valley between his pecs, his skin was horribly cold. “I know I was wrong.”

“You feel like ice there.” My brow furrowed. He was right—something was definitely wrong. But I didn’t know what, or what he meant. “What happened, Luke? What did we do wrong?”

“You did nothing wrong, love. The problem lies in fate. My vow was a serious one. Holy. I didn’t break it, but it was still broken. Now, my soul is forfeit. Neither Heaven nor Hell can claim it. Neither can I.”

“Who has it, then?” I tried to imagine where things that were neither Heaven nor Hell would go. “Limbo? Because if so—Don and I can just go get it for you. We’ll bring it back to you.” I smiled and rubbed my thumb along the ridge of his pec. “Then, you’ll be right as rain.”

“Not limbo, love. Something bigger than that.” Luke took my hand from his chest and raised it to his lips. When he kissed my skin, beneath my other set of fingers, his cock twitched with need. “It’s in a pair of very capable hands—but not a pair of hands that are accustomed to giving things back.”

“One of... the other gods, maybe?” I thought of Mal’s talk of Hades. The god of a different underworld. It made a kind of sense, but I had a feeling I was missing the mark.

“The Fourth has my soul now, darling.” Luke closed his eyes and held my hand to his cheek. “The rider on the pale horse. Death. Every night, I feel myself being pulled to him in my dreams—and no matter how hard I try to fight it, there’s no getting away.”

“The Fourth is... Oh.” My face fell. My heart crashed down into my stomach and the flame in my womb curled up in on itself. The Fourth had always been a good friend to Luke and me. But if he was finally being called to collect his due... “Fuck. This is all my fault.”

“It’s not,” Luke promised. “You don’t need to worry, love. I would have spent eternity in agony if you hadn’t done what you’d done.”

“But now, I’ll lose you all over again.” Just a few moments ago, I’d been so hopeful that a good, solid fuck would bring Luke back to me. That hope was dead now. And soon, Luke would be too. “And this time, it really will be forever. Won’t it?”

I searched Luke’s eyes for the slightest glimmer of possibility, but I didn’t find it.

Instead, he just tugged me down into bed beside him and moved his lips close to mine.

“Forever’s only a concept, darling girl.” I didn’t think that was true at all—but I didn’t know how to argue semantics with Luke. All I wanted to do right now was scream, then probably, cry. “Just be mine. Be with me

while you can. Hold me while you're able and, god, tell me you love me again."

"Of course I love you, Luke." I'd only just started to piece my broken heart back together, but after this latest revelation, I could feel those shards turning to dust and blowing away on the wind. "I love you with everything I am."

"Then it was all worth it." He moved his lips closer. His breathing was shallow. There was ice there in his breath, too. "You saved me from torture. You gave me a chance at peace. Soon, you'll give me an heir. And best of all..." He leaned in even closer. Tenderly, his lips brushed against mine. "You've given me a chance to kiss you again."

"Is that all you want? A kiss?" I wanted to hit him. I wanted to kick myself. I wanted to burn down Heaven and Hell just to make sure that Luke could stay here by my side.

And I knew that it wouldn't make any difference. If even Luke wasn't entertaining the notion of defying Death, of fighting this... how did I have any hope of setting it right?

"For starters, yes." Luke's eyes opened, glimmering with that same old wickedness in them that I'd come to love more than life itself. "But I do think you climbed into this bed with something more than just a kiss in mind."

My eyes trailed to the blankets over Luke's lap. My fingers were still curled against his cock. It was still hard and thick and—thankfully—undeniably burning hot.

"You can't be serious," I breathed. "So *now* you want to fuck?"

"Why not?" Luke's lips curled into an aching smirk. "When death knocks at your door, it's best to say *fuck it* and just accept your fate... But frankly, if I have to go, I'd rather go out fucking you instead."

"I'm not going to let you die with your cock inside me, you bastard." Tears burned my eyes as I tore my gaze away from him. I should have taken my hand away from his cock, too—but some things were harder to let go of than others.

And I'd rarely known Luke's cock to be anything but hard.

"My time's not up yet, love." He reached up to my cheek and turned my face back to his. "And you're still my wife. I can order you, if you like." His smirk darkened handsomely at the memory of our own vows. "I might like that myself."

I blinked down at him, feeling my body and my heart and my soul all tearing themselves to shreds all over again.

“You might have to.” Even through all this pain, my cunt throbbed at the thought.

“You want me to?”

I swallowed back my tears, then nodded. “Order me, Luke.”

Our vows to obey each other worked both ways.

“Kiss me, Evie,” Luke whispered, and obediently, my lips moved to his.

His tongue slipped into my mouth immediately. His kiss was greedy and hungry and full of a passion I still worried his dying body didn’t have the energy to sustain.

But that worry was quickly put to rest. Luke took my wrist in his hand and squeezed tight, just enough to hurt a little. He held my fingers to the cold part of his chest as he claimed the prize of my mouth.

“Now,” he hushed, pulled his lips away. “Ride me. Ride me until you come, then ride me harder still. I don’t want you to even think about stopping. Only how good it feels to have me inside.”

My body slipped beneath the blankets with him. I hooked a knee across his hips, mounting him. He let go of my wrist then, but only so he could hold my waist in his hands instead.

“Squeeze my cock in that pretty little fist of yours,” Luke ordered. “Feel how hard I am for you. Feel the way you make my cock swell stiff just for wanting you. Long and thick and all yours.”

My fingers wrapped themselves around his shaft. I pressed the tip of his cock against the sensitive bud of my swollen clit and stroked him, feeling it. Just like he’d told me to.

He was so thick that every time I took him inside me, I was worried he wouldn’t fit. So long, I had no idea how he managed to make enough room in my cunt to take the entire length of him—but somehow, he always did. So stiff, I knew that he’d stay hard for me even long after we were both completely spent.

“Raise your hips up. Tease yourself with it.” Luke’s lips pulled back in a dark, handsome snarl. “Let me feel your honey dripping down my shaft. Let me see how bad you want it.”

“*Fuck*,” I swore. Obeying. I couldn’t help but obey. “I want you too much already.”

Through all the tragedies of our love, wanting Luke was the one thing that never completely went away.

“I want you too, love.” He reached up to brush my hair behind my ear. It was an abrupt shift of tone. He went from domineering to sweet in an instant.

But Luke’s sweetness wasn’t soft. It was hard and rough and demanding of sweetness in return.

“Can I have you?” I breathed, desperate for him now.

“Kiss me, love. Shut me up,” he breathed back to me. “Keep kissing me and you can have whatever you like.”

Desperate for him, I crushed my lips against his. With his order fulfilled, now he couldn’t order me at all anymore.

Now, he was all mine—and I was all his.

I shifted my hips forward, still kissing him as I caught his tip right at my entrance. As I plunged myself down on him, our kiss turned into a frantic gasp of surprise.

“Oh.” I panted as I settled my hips against his. He was all the way inside me. A slick, perfect entry. His cock throbbed within me, pulsing against my G-spot like a heartbeat.

Even just that, if I stayed there for long enough, would have been plenty to send me gently and gorgeously over the edge.

But Luke wasn’t satisfied with gentle.

“More,” Luke growled. He sucked my lip between his and bit it, straight white teeth sinking into tender flesh.

That tiny burst of pain was enough to urge me into movement. I wrapped my arms around his head, twining my fingers in his thick, dark waves. I reclaimed my lip, then bit his lower lip right back.

If he wanted more, he’d have it.

He could have as much of me as he liked.

My hips set a rhythm. It felt like dancing, the way we’d danced together once in Lust. I knew the beat because it was the same as our heartbeats.

I knew the song. It was one we’d played on the piano together in Heresy as I sat on Luke’s lap. One we’d written together long ago.

His cock was hot and stiff inside me. Every time I plunged down on him, a small explosion of pleasure went off inside me.

Enough explosions like that, and I knew there’d be an even bigger one.

One that we'd share.

My head was thrumming with need. Around him, my pussy clenched and released with every thrust, pulling him even deeper inside.

And still, I kissed him. I kissed him to keep him here with me. I kissed him like it would be the last time.

"Fuck." Luke pulled out of the kiss to grunt the curse. He drew a breath—a ragged one—and I couldn't tell if it was because of the sex, or because he was slipping away from me completely. "*Fuck*, Evie. Just... *Fuck*."

Before I could wonder any further, Luke's hips bucked up beneath me. He rolled me over on the mattress, changing positions.

Now, he was on top of me.

Now, he was in control.

For a furious flurry of thrusts, he wasn't dying at all anymore. He was his old self again, taking me just as roughly as we'd always taken each other.

He was my Luke. My Lucifer. My husband, the Devil himself.

And as he pounded his cock into me, burying it deep inside with every thrust, he was very much alive.

When the explosion came, just like I'd known it would, we shuddered through it together. Luke's cum gushed into me, rushing in and pooling in every space that his cock didn't already fill. There wasn't much of that to be had, though. My cunt was made to fit him. When there wasn't any more room for his cum inside me, it followed the thickness of his shaft and spilled out onto my pussy and the mattress beneath me.

His teeth found my neck and I joined him in the ecstasy. He bit down, claiming me. I was his wife and his bitch and his goddess and his whore all over again. The world turned bright and full of color. Then, as I clutched at him, it turned so white that for a moment, I couldn't see anything at all.

"Luke," I gasped, smoothing my hands against his cheeks. The world faded back in slowly. So did a sudden, intense exhaustion. "Luke. I need you. Don't leave me. Please don't go."

He turned our bodies onto their sides. He was inside me still as the pleasure smoothed out into a different kind of desperation.

I hugged my legs around his waist, crossing my ankles so he couldn't pull away from me.

He didn't. He only folded me closer to him and held me tightly in his arms.

"I'm here, love," he promised. "I'm here. I need you too."

We lay like that for what felt like an eternity. I could only measure the moments by the sounds of our breaths in between kisses. I waited for our breathing to slow into something normal, but it didn't.

The reality of losing him was too much for normal right now.

Instead, we clung to each other and let the heaving in our chests say all the things we'd already said a thousand times in a thousand past lives.

I love you. I need you. Don't go.

I stared into his eyes for a long while, searching his blues for something. Anything.

I wasn't going to lose him. I couldn't bear it. Not again.

What I needed was an angel.

But all I had right now was an angel—the one in my bed. An angel and a broken heart that didn't know how to give up all hope.

Slowly, I slid my tongue over my lips, thinking hard.

I'd obeyed all of Luke's orders.

Maybe now, it was time for him to obey one of mine.

"Tell me how to save you." My voice rasped raggedly in my throat. My eyes were locked on his.

He looked concerned for a moment. Then, as he bit his lower lip, his expression turned to one of tentative surprise.

"There... might be one." Luke's brow lowered into a frown of annoyance. "But I don't like it, and I doubt you will, either."

"Tell me, Luke." I didn't care whether he liked it or not. I wasn't giving up on him. On us. All three of us, now.

On the life we were meant to have together. One we'd fought like hell throughout the ages for this chance to finally build.

It was a life I'd do anything to save.

"Damn you, woman." Luke shook his head, trying to fight my order. But this time, I knew he couldn't. The highest vow he held right now was the one he'd made to me when he'd made me his bride. "Fine. I'll tell you. But you have to do something for me, first."

"You're dying, Luke," I said, exasperated. His cock was still hard inside me, but this really wasn't the time. "I don't know that we have time to go again."

“Maybe in a bit,” Luke said with an exasperated laugh. He lifted me off of him by my hips and laid me at his side. “But no. I want to show you something first. Something very precious to me.”

“Another one of my memories?” I guessed. My wings were folding again now. They tucked themselves against my shoulder blades until, somehow, they faded away.

“No,” Luke said, moving his lips against my cheek. The little starburst mark he’d left there on my cheekbone, right where he’d first kissed me, glowed hot and bright beneath his mouth. “One of mine.”

LUKE

Somewhere In A Memory...

The Garden Of Eden, The Eighth Day

The Almighty had taken a full week to create the universe and all that inhabited it.

To fuck it all up, I'd only needed a day.

My body still ached from my fall. The places on my shoulder blades where the angels had torn my wings out were still raw and caked with blood. For the time being, I'd invented clothing to keep the elements off my back and hide those particular wounds. The black linen shirt and trousers I wore were comfortable. They suited me. In Eden, the humans were still wandering around innocent and naked. It was the opposite of erotic, really.

The best thing about clothing was the way it concealed nakedness. It made the body into something individually sacred. A secret only revealed to those they trusted.

When I found good reason to, I imagined I'd rather enjoy taking these clothes back off.

I'd fashion a new pair of wings for myself someday soon, too. Black ones, dark and sinister, to counter the white wings the angels still wore.

The ones that I'd lost.

Already, I thought of them—the angels—as something entirely different than myself.

They'd wanted order. They'd wanted control.

I'd only ever wanted freedom. Freedom for the humans, and freedom for myself, too.

Still, I was certain that all of it was somehow connected. All part of the Almighty's ineffable plan.

I wasn't sure how taming all the demons of Hell and crowning myself their king was part of that plan yet, but what could I say?

I'd always suspected I'd look dashing in a crown.

Now that I'd carved out a kingdom for myself, I found myself still wanting.

I was powerful. I was angry.

Worst of all, I was bored.

I wandered the edges of Eden with a scowl on my face and my hands in my pockets, looking for something new to ruin. Another feather in my cap.

Something else in the perfection of creation that I could lay claim to for my own.

And just when I thought I might have to spend the rest of eternity roaming these lands with nothing to do—

I heard something soft and sad come from behind the mulberry bushes. Something so gentle and sweet that it erased the scowl from my face in an instant.

In its place, curiosity reigned. Not just because I wondered what kind of creature would make such a mournful noise—or, for that matter, why?

But because it stirred something within me, something tender and hungry that I hadn't even realized lived within my chest at all, I pulled the bushes aside. That was when I saw her. I recognized her in an instant.

I'd been there, watching from a vantage point up above, when the Almighty had stirred her from dirt and breathed His spirit into her lungs.

She was pale like moonlight. Her hair was long and thick and golden as the sun itself. Her tiny waist flared out beautifully into wide, lovely hips and a heart-shaped arse. Her long, shapely legs were exquisite.

Her shoulders heaved with grief.

Lilith. The first woman. The man the Almighty had paired her with hadn't inspired me enough to even remember his name, but hers... I

shaped it on my tongue, too enraptured to make a sound.

Lilith. Hers was a name I'd been sure to remember. So perfect it was impossible to forget.

I'd seen her before, yes, but never like this. Never this close.

Just seeing her from this new angle made my jaw ache with how badly I wanted to sink my teeth into her.

It made other things ache too.

"What's that noise you're making?" I asked, finally choosing to make myself known to her. "What does it mean?"

I couldn't help myself, really. There was only one woman on this entirely blessed planet, and even though she already belonged to another, I'd already decided that she ought to be mine instead.

At the sound of my voice, she startled and turned. Her cheeks were stained with something wet that we hadn't come up with a name for yet. Her eyes, gray and full of mysteries, were watery too.

I invented a new word in that moment: heartache. It was what I felt when I saw the sadness on her face.

It was what I imagined she felt too—but why?

"I think I'm crying," she said, sniffing. She wiped the wetness from her cheeks with her slender fingertips and kept them there, like she was trying to hide that crying from me. "I think these are tears."

"And why are you crying, darling girl?" I gestured to the treetops that canopied over her, where the beasts of the air were sleeping soundly. I was considering calling them *birds*. "You're in Paradise, after all. Everything you need, you only need to want."

"I've just been thrown out of it, actually." Lilith pursed her lips for a moment, and the crying seemed to subside.

"Have you?" I furrowed my brow, feeling a sudden fury. More heartache, too. "Why?"

I knew a thing or two about being thrown out of the place where I rightfully belonged.

"My husband doesn't want me to be his wife." She shrugged like the notion didn't hurt her. Like it didn't matter.

She wasn't fooling me. If it didn't hurt, then why would she cry?

"Idiot of a husband, then." There—another new word. *Idiot*. It was perfect for him. I almost smiled at my own cleverness, but that seemed

inappropriate given Lilith's tears. "You're perfect. The Almighty ensured it himself. What's not to want?"

"Adam doesn't like me."

I gestured at her. All of her. "What's not to like?"

Her gray eyes narrowed slowly with suspicion. "Stop that."

"Stop what?"

"Whatever you're doing." Her eyes glinted darkly with something I assume must have been malice. "I know who you are."

"Oh? And who am I?" I took a step closer. Just to see if I could.

To see if she'd run.

"Lucifer. The Dawnstar. Satan. The Devil." She said each of my names with a venom that felt almost... *holy*. Or unholy, maybe. It was still hard to tell which was which. "You're the adversary. They warned me about you."

"The angels?"

"Who else?"

Finally, I couldn't fight my smirk anymore. "And what did they say?"

"That you would come and try to tempt me," she said, a little uncertain now. Maybe the angels had been vague. That seemed like their style. "That anything you offered, I shouldn't take."

"And what would I offer?"

She licked her lips as she looked me up and down. "I don't know."

"Well, what do you want?"

"I don't want anything *you're* offering. That's for sure."

Mm. She was feisty, wasn't she? Like a little flicker of hellfire, unleashed upon a world that didn't yet know how to appreciate her heat.

"Maybe not so sure now, though." I gestured to Paradise again. "If they've kicked you out, I don't image they intend for you to fend for yourself out here on your own."

She blinked, then sighed. A little act of surrender. "I think they expect me to die out here."

"Because your idiot husband doesn't like you?" I refused to use the male human's name. I'd forgotten it already again, anyway. "That hardly seems fair."

"He had... strange ideas about mating. How we should do it." Her brow furrowed. "I didn't like his ideas. I had my own."

My eyebrow arched. “Mating? I haven’t heard of that before. What is it?”

“I don’t know exactly. Something special between two people, definitely. But I’m not sure how it’s supposed to go. We were trying to figure that out.” Her voice dripped with frustration. “But when I told him how *I* wanted to do it, he looked at me like I was worms and told the angels that he wanted me gone.”

“And they gave him his way?” Impossible. Whatever idiot ideas he’d had, I didn’t imagine they were worth abandoning her over. She was the better of the two humans the Almighty had created, after all. I couldn’t think of anything worth abandoning her over at all. “That’s bullshit.”

For a glorious moment, her lips twitched like she wanted to laugh.

“Yeah,” she agreed when she’d composed herself once more. “Yeah, it is.”

“This *mating*.” I liked the sound of the word on my lips. “What’s its purpose? What’s the goal?”

“To make me into a mother. I guess.” She shrugged, suddenly looking smaller. I didn’t like it. I preferred her tall and angry, with her chin held high. Taking up as much space as she liked. “And now, I’ll never be one at all.”

“Do you want that? To be a mother?” If I could determine her desires, maybe I could help her.

I wanted to help her. If the angels had scorned her, then I understood the pain she must have felt.

I was drawn to her for other reasons, too. Reasons that I couldn’t quite explain. Not yet. Instinct, maybe. Something older than the universe that called my body to hers and made me want to lay claim to it.

Looking at her made my cock throb. It made the roots of my teeth ache.

I knew exactly what I wanted from her, even if I didn’t yet know why.

I wanted to make her mine and mine alone.

“How did he want to do it, then?” I asked. Then, feeling cruel, I added, “Bet it was stupid. Bet it was bullshit, too.”

“It was.” She crossed her arms beneath her breasts—and what beautiful breasts she had. Heavy and perky and full, peaked with nipples that I wanted to bite as well. “He wanted me to lay in the dirt with my legs spread and not make a sound until he decided what he ought to do.”

I snorted. "In the dirt? You?" Putting a creature as exquisite as her in the dirt was surely some kind of blasphemy. The other human was obviously something so much worse than an idiot. He was selfish and cruel as well. "That's not where you belong."

"That's what I said!" She looked vindicated, and I didn't blame her.

Our second point of agreement was even more tantalizing than our first.

"How did you want to do it?" I asked. "You said you had your own ideas."

Suddenly, her cheeks were flushed pink like a sunrise. The color extended down her neck, all the way to those perfect nipples of hers.

I wanted to pull her to me so I could take them into my mouth. To what end, I didn't know yet. Nothing practical, I was sure, but I wanted to, just the same. Intensely, for no reason.

And just like that, I invented desire.

"Adam told me it was wrong of me to want it. So... I don't want to say," Lilith mumbled, looking away from me. "But it wouldn't have involved me being in the disgusting *dirt*."

"Good. You should only have to be in the dirt if you want to be." She might look nice dirty, now that I was considering it. It would be an excellent excuse to draw her into a river with me so I could wash her clean again.

"Well, what I want doesn't seem to matter. The angels only care about *him*." She sighed, scowling at that bloody dirt they were all so keen to have her lie in. "It doesn't matter now, though. They'll make him a new wife, and I'll die out here. He said so himself. Then, I'll be lying in the dirt anyway, and I won't get to be a mother on top of it."

"I wouldn't let you die." I nodded to the soil at her feet. She had pretty feet, just like the rest of her. Small and delicate. Elegant, too. "I don't want you to be in the dirt either."

"I don't care what you want." She turned her chin up and made a point of not looking at me. There was something proud and haughty about the way she held herself in that moment that made me reconsider this whole dirt business for a moment.

Maybe she'd like it better if I pinned her against it. She wouldn't have to be quiet about it. The noises she made when she was crying softly were

so beautiful, I imagined she'd make even more beautiful noises if she could be loud.

"You really hate me that much, do you? I could offer you so many gorgeous things, love. Given your current options—lying in the dirt or dying in it—this doesn't seem like a time to go looking a gift horse in the mouth."

Slowly, she glanced back at me. Curious, but wary. "What's a gift horse?"

I laughed, surprised. "I don't actually know."

I could tell she didn't mean to. She tried to hide it behind her hand, just like her tears, but I saw. I heard it.

She laughed as well.

"I can't afford to trust you, Lucifer," she explained when she'd finally tucked her smile away again. She hadn't done a very good job of it, though. It still lingered in her eyes, sparkling like stars. "You're the first Fallen. The Great Deceiver. Father of Sin."

"Am I now?" I took another step closer. It seemed the angels had given me a few more exciting new names while I'd been busy raising Hell. "I don't think I'm father of anything. Not yet, anyway." Another step closer. "But maybe you could change that."

"What?" She moved her foot backward, like she was finally considering running, but her other foot didn't follow. "How?"

"Make me one," I suggested. "And I'll make you a mother. We can try this *mating* thing together—and I'll let you have me however you want."

"You're lying again," she countered immediately. "They say that's all you do. Lie."

"What do I have to lie about?" I held my arms open wide, palms facing her so she could see I wasn't hiding anything within them. "Even if I wanted to lie to you, I don't know what the point would be. If you choose to trust me, you should do so with full knowledge. No tricks. No lies. And I certainly wouldn't lie about sex."

"Sex?"

"Mating. Whatever you want to call it." I traded my smirk for a warm, come-hither smile. "But if *I* was to decide how it should be done, I think I'd make sure it was pleasurable. Comforting. Warm." I looked her body up and down again. Her smooth stomach. The golden curls over her womanhood. My cock stiffened even more against the fastenings of my

trousers just from staring at her. Perfection. “You’re naked, you know. You’d be warmer if you had clothes on, like I do.”

She shivered like she’d only just realized how cold the place outside Paradise truly was.

Shivering looked beautiful on her too. I imagined most things always would.

“I don’t know what *naked* is. Or *clothes*, for that matter.” She nodded to my trousers and shirt. “Are they what you’re wearing?”

“Do you like them?”

“No.” She looked away from me again, but a second later, she seemed unable to help herself. She glanced back. “I think you should take them off.”

“Of course. That’s part of what I invented them for.” I stripped out of my shirt and undid my trousers immediately. Those, I didn’t mind leaving lying in the dirt. “There. Now we’re both naked. This is my body. I’m showing it to you, not because I have to, or because I don’t have any other choice. I’m showing it to you because I want you to see me. That’s fair, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” she said after a long moment. I could tell she was trying to look away from me, but her eyes were locked on my body too completely. My chest, then the muscles of my abs, and finally, my thick, hard cock. She couldn’t tear her gaze from my form. I didn’t want her to. “Yes, it is.” She bit her lip. “If we did mate—”

“We really should, I think.”

“Do you think it would be wrong?”

Slowly, I tilted my jaw down and narrowed my eyes. “The angels didn’t teach you that? Right from wrong?”

I was beginning to think this *idiot* word I’d come up with had uses beyond Lilith’s useless husband.

“I don’t know anything.” She looked suddenly vulnerable. Maybe even afraid. “They hardly told me anything at all.”

“I could teach you,” I offered. Another step closer. Soon, she’d be close enough to me to touch. “I wouldn’t mind.”

“And why would you do that?” Her gaze was still on me. Hungry, just like mine.

I was beginning to suspect that with enough knowledge, we might be very similar indeed.

Maybe even—dare I hope?—maybe one and the same.

“Because you deserve to know things.” A final step towards her. “Because if you don’t know right from wrong, or good from evil, then how can you choose what to be?”

“I don’t know.” Finally, she managed to look away from me again. It had taken her long enough.

I reached for her hair, and though she stiffened at my touch, when I rubbed that golden color between my fingers, she didn’t swat me away.

Didn’t ask me to stop, either.

“When I found you here, behind these bushes, I think you were hiding, Lilith.”

“I wasn’t,” she insisted, but she didn’t sound sure.

“You were. You were keeping yourself hidden because you felt shame, and you didn’t even know why.” I let her hair slip from my fingers and moved my hand to her cheek. A gamble, but one I was more than interested enough to make without fear. “You don’t know what you want because you don’t know how to choose for yourself. But I could give you that. The power of choice.”

I could give her the entire world beyond Paradise. I could give her so, so much more.

“And if I accepted this offer... then what?”

I smiled. “You could decide if you wanted to be a mother. You could decide if you wanted to mate with me or not.”

“And what will you take from me if I say yes?”

Ah. There she was. Clever thing. She hardly knew *nothing*, or else she wouldn’t have asked at all.

She knew that all gifts came with a price.

“Something small,” I said, moving my thumb across her cheek. Maybe I was imagining it, but it felt like she was leaning into the warmth of my touch. “You don’t have much right now, and I’d hate to take what little you have.”

“Something... small.” She sounded like she was at least toying with the idea.

“Yes,” I agreed. “Something I could easily give back to you.”

“But then I’d owe you one,” she pointed out.

My smile widened by a fraction. “You might find that you enjoy being in my debt.”

She licked her lips again. Hungry. Always hungry. I liked the way it looked.

I'd like it even better if she licked my lips instead.

"I guess I wouldn't know until you showed me." Slowly, she nodded. "I'm tired of not knowing things. It makes me afraid, and I'm tired of being afraid."

"Then I'll make sure you don't have to be afraid anymore either," I promised, pressing my thumb to her cheek. When I moved the pad of my thumb away, there was a pale, small starburst on her skin. My mark.

Mine.

"I'd like that," she said softly. "So... what's your price?"

"A kiss," I said, just as softly. "Only one. And I'll give it right back."

She blinked at me. "What's a kiss?"

I wrapped my arms around her. "I'll show you. It will be your first lesson."

Then, nice and slow so she could track my movements, I turned her mouth up toward mine and greedily claimed her lips.

It was a kiss that lasted for decades. It was a kiss that lasted for no time at all.

It was one hell of a thing, and so was she.

When we finally pulled away from each other, there was a smile on her pretty mouth.

"Oh," she breathed, looking at me with a new light in her eyes. "I think I understand now."

"Are you sure?"

"I think so," she murmured, leaning toward me again. Her eyes closed again. "I think it's wrong to be with you."

"I'm sure it is."

"I think I want it anyway."

"Do you? Are you sure?" My entire body felt something so new and so right, even I couldn't entirely tell.

"Help me decide," she whispered. "Kiss me again?"

I did, of course, but I also knew I didn't have to.

I'd given her the full knowledge of good and evil in that first kiss, as far as I understood it myself.

The second kiss was just the beginning of mating. An answer.

A promise.

She could choose things for herself now.
And she'd chosen me.
She'd chosen sin.

EVIE

The memory of our first meeting still lingered pleasantly in my mind as Luke and I made our way to the Bellagio's elevator.

I might have been naked when he found me, freshly created and crying outside Eden, but Luke certainly made sure I dressed well now.

"Are you sure you're going to be able to walk okay?" I asked from beneath his arm. He was draped over the shoulders of my red Versace cocktail dress, leaning on me just enough that I could tell he was struggling to keep his feet.

"Funny," said Luke. He wore a suit from the same designer, cut in white. His eyes were smiling, but they looked more sunken than usual. Beneath their glimmering, he looked tired, too. "After the way you just took my cock, I was about to ask you the same thing."

"Very funny." Truth be told, Luke *had* left me a little sore. Not that I minded. "It's good to know that you've always been a charmer. Even from the beginning."

Seeing myself in Eden through Luke's memory had certainly been eye-opening. It was equal parts touching and thrilling, to know how much he'd wanted me. Even from our first meeting.

Even before he'd ever spoken to me at all.

"I was clumsier back then," Luke said with a harsh laugh. "Too cocky. I was lucky the only other man on the entire face of the Earth was such a

wanker, really. If I'd tried that gambit on you now, I imagine you would have smacked me."

"And I imagine you would have deserved it," I said fondly. "But it's good to know you've honed your pick-up skills through the years." There was a sigh on my lips in the place of a smile, though. "I wish I didn't know how badly all of our trysts ended up. It would have been nice to know that we managed to get a happy ending at least once."

"Can't have a happy ending if there's never any ending at all." Luke's tone was almost wistful. For the first time since time began, we were both staring down the barrel of an ending now.

Luckily, Luke had a plan. Even if it hadn't occurred to him until I'd forced him to think of one. It was better than nothing, though.

I'd take whatever chance we could make for ourselves at this point.

But if Luke's plan didn't work—if The Fourth really did take his soul and kill him for good, there wouldn't be another go-round this time.

This time, our ending would be final. No hopes for a spin-off or a sequel. Just a hole in my life where my husband should have been.

An empty place in my bed where he'd never be again.

"Are you going to clue me in on exactly what this plan of yours is?" I asked as the elevator's doors opened to the Bellagio's first floor. "Or are we just going in blind?"

"I can assure you that it's a gamble," Luke said darkly.

I narrowed my eyes. "Is that... a pun?"

"Maybe."

Ugh. He was incorrigible.

He was mine.

"This doesn't have anything to do with Avarice, does it? Because you're still an angel, Luke. If we go to the Inferno, you'll burn."

Luke laughed. "We're in Vegas, love. Here, every game of chance under the sun is just a roll of the dice away."

Luke led me into the Bellagio's casino. Cocktail waitresses delivered drinks to bleary-eyed poker players and little old ladies played the slot machines within.

Luke's eyes scanned the floor like he was looking for a very specific game, though.

I hoped it was a rigged one. Generally, I was against cheating, but right now, we could use all the help we could get.

Maybe if Lady Luck wasn't on our side, Luke would simply take matters into his own hands.

"Ah. There he is." Luke pointed to a table near the back where a massive man in an expensive suit and a motorcycle helmet was sitting in the dealer's position, shuffling cards.

The Fourth. Ever since I'd met him, I'd considered him one of Luke's closest personal allies... and a friend, too.

I still hadn't forgotten the way he'd scared the Fallen out of the throne room for me. I'd always assumed that he was at least a little bit fond of Luke and me.

But I guessed that when you were besties with death, eventually that friendship was always inevitably going to come to a cold, tragic end.

When Luke and I sat down at the table, The Fourth nodded at us both like he already knew what we were here for.

"Hello, old friend." Luke gave The Fourth a tired smirk. The Fourth didn't say hello back. "Mind if we play a few practice rounds before we begin?"

The Fourth shrugged, which I supposed meant yes.

Luke tossed a silver coin down on the felt-top table. I didn't recognize the markings on it—two daggers and a helmet—but it looked incredibly old.

The Fourth produced an identical coin from beneath the poker table, matching Luke's bet.

"This is your big plan," I whispered, catching on. The cards were crisp and springy. A fresh deck. "You're going to gamble with death for your life."

"A classic," Luke confirmed. "Chess would be customary, but it looks like Azrael has chosen blackjack this time."

"How do you play?" I asked, half embarrassed that I didn't know.

Gambling wasn't exactly something that I spent a lot of time thinking about. Given my luck up until this point, I didn't really have much hope for my odds.

Winning wasn't a very exciting concept for me. Not when you had to put something down on the table to lose first.

But if this was Luke's last gambit, we probably didn't have any other choice.

“It’s not hard,” Luke assured me. He tossed another coin on the table. “Deal her in. We’ll teach her. The Queen of Hell ought to know how to play cards.”

The Fourth placed another piece of silver down on the table. He dealt Luke a card, then me, then himself. His card was face up. A four. He went round again, until we all had two cards. The Fourth’s second card was face down, tucked beneath his four.

I lifted my cards up from the felt to look at them. A nine and a queen.

“I don’t know what these mean,” I admitted to Luke.

“Let me see.” He lifted my cards up as well, then nodded. “The nine is face value. The queen counts as a ten. Add them together and you get—”

“Nineteen,” I said, glad I could at least do basic math.

“Good girl. The goal is twenty-one, so you’re close—but sometimes close is dangerous. Here—look at mine as well.”

Luke had a five and a nine. Fourteen altogether.

“So, whoever’s closest to twenty-one between the three of us wins?” The Fourth only had a measly four, so even if he got a ten, he’d only have the same score as Luke.

Maybe it was a good omen?

Luke chuckled. “No. Now, we decide if we want a third card.” He tapped the table, looking to The Fourth. “Hit me.”

The Fourth dealt Luke another card. Luke showed it to me—a seven. Now, Luke had twenty-one.

“Interesting.” If I wanted to do the same, I’d need what? A two? There were only four of those in the deck, which I supposed meant my chances of getting one were low. “What happens if you go over twenty-one?”

“It’s called a bust,” said Luke. He let his eyes slide down to my breasts, which were pushed up high with cleavage peeking out from beneath the neckline of my dress. “Unfortunately, unlike yours, it’s bad thing. You automatically lose.”

“I think I’ll skip the third card, then.”

“Good choice,” agreed Luke. He looked to The Fourth. “She’ll stand.” His gaze trailed back to me. “That means you want to end your turn without taking a hit.”

“Got it.” I nodded to The Fourth’s four. “What about his hand?”

“All you have to do to win is beat it,” said Luke.

The Fourth flipped over his second card, a nine. He took two more hits—a three, then a two.

That left his total at eighteen. One less than mine, three less than Luke's.

The Fourth pushed his two coins our way, then swept up all of our cards.

We'd won.

"That was... kind of fun, actually," I said softly. Maybe this wouldn't be so hard after all.

"It's always fun when you're winning," said Luke. "Let's play a few more rounds before we get down to business, eh?"

The Fourth obliged him. On the second round, Luke and I both lost. Aces could be ones or elevens, I learned, but the dealer's first ace always counted as the latter unless it busted the hand. His second card was a king.

The coins we'd just won went back to The Fourth.

"I see what you mean now," I said with a frown. "Losing is decidedly less fun."

"If I survive this, I'll teach you how to count cards next," Luke promised with a wink. The glimmer in his eyes was dimming, though. We both knew well that it was a promise he might not be able to make good on. "It makes losing much more satisfying."

As The Fourth gathered up the cards this time, he switched out the decks.

A glance to Luke told me we weren't practicing anymore.

This was the real deal.

The Fourth's new deck looked almost as old as the coins were, though I suspected that wasn't possible. They were thin, chipped at the edges like mice had nibbled on them, and well-worn. The backs of the cards were swirled with black and white filigree. When The Fourth shuffled them, I saw a flickering skull appear within the cards as they folded together.

This was it, then. The moment of truth.

"Sit back, love." Luke took the back of my skull in his hand and pulled my lips to his for a kiss. I knew it might be one of our last. "This one is all me."

Luke pocketed his coins and brushed his fingertips against his chest through the split in his button-down. He looked paler than ever now. As his fingers moved against his chest, his brow furrowed and his face fell.

“Fuck.” He looked at The Fourth. “I didn’t realize how far gone I was. *Fuck.*”

I didn’t know what Luke had been looking for, but The Fourth didn’t seem dissuaded by Luke’s inability to find it.

He merely turned to me and slid a card my way.

“No,” Luke said firmly, but The Fourth had already reached into his own chest and pulled out a white poker chip.

It was black around its edges, like it had been a different color once. The Fourth placed the chip down on the table, and Luke pounded his fist against the felt in return.

“No,” Luke said again. His lips were snarled. “Not her. Not like this. If you already have me, then take me. I’m not losing her as well.”

I glanced between them as they stared each other down. Luke’s face was sharp with fury. The Fourth just looked expectant, as always.

But beneath his helmet, though I couldn’t see his eyes, I somehow knew they’d shifted from Luke onto me.

My fingers brushed against my own sternum with a mind of their own. By the time I realized what I was doing, I’d already pulled something glowing and golden out from somewhere deep within me.

Another poker chip. This one created its own sunshiny light as I placed it down.

“Evie, *no!*” Luke grabbed my wrist and pulled my hand away. My entire body followed, swiveling to face him. “I won’t let you play for me. I’m finished. I’m done.”

“I’m not giving up on you,” I told him, setting my jaw and raising my chin. “I promised you I wasn’t losing you again. And I won’t.”

“You have our child to think of too now, Evie.” Luke’s eyes were sunken and full of pain. His grip on my wrist, initially so harsh and firm, was weakening by the second.

He was dying, and I knew it.

But I had one last trick up my sleeve. One that I’d been quietly mulling over ever since my wedding to Luke. When we’d kissed, we’d been bathed in golden light. Luke said it reminded him of the love of the Almighty.

Now, I glowed with it too—and so did the chip, which I was beginning to suspect represented my soul.

“I know what I’m doing, Luke.” I moved my hand to his face so I could stroke his quickly hollowing cheek. “Don’t worry. You don’t need

to.”

“Don’t need to?” Luke spat at me. “You’ve only just learned how to play!”

“It’s our only option.” I searched for the flame in my belly and found it flickering brighter than ever. “Let me do this. Don’t argue with me. You can’t stop me.”

“Like hell I can’t,” Luke shot back at me. “Remember our vows, love? You promised to obey. I forbid you from doing this.”

I gave him a sad smile. “And that night you left me to go to Heaven, I forbade you from leaving. You still went.”

The vows we’d made to each other had been powerful ones.

But there was something even more powerful in the works here.

Luke’s plan had taken a detour, but in its place, a different plan had arisen.

One that wouldn’t be denied.

“Please,” Luke pleaded. “Think of our child. If you lose, you both die.”

“I know.” I closed my eyes and pressed my lips to his. “So I’m not going to lose.”

“It’s fucking *blackjack*, Evie!” Luke snapped. “You don’t just get to decide whether you lose or win!”

“I guess not,” I said with a shrug. “Call it a leap of faith.”

I pushed my chip forward, and The Fourth continued to deal me in.

My first card was that two I’d needed earlier. My second was an ace. Anything more than that, though, and things could get dicey fast.

I had either a thirteen or a three. If I took a hit and got an eight, I’d win immediately.

In front of The Fourth, an eight was already on the table.

That lowered my chances of getting one, I knew.

I tapped the table anyway.

“Hit me,” I said, and The Fourth gave me another card.

Seven. *Damn*. It was a hard hand to beat, but if The Fourth managed to get his own cards to twenty-one, I’d lose anyway.

Desperately, I wished I knew what that card beneath his eight was.

But before I found out, I’d need to decide whether to hit again, or stay.

“Evie,” Luke warned.

I knew he wanted me to stay.

But I wanted him to stay too. And I wasn't going to settle for anything less than certainty.

I closed my eyes and found that flicker of flame again. It felt warm and comforting. Encouraging, even.

I won't let you die, I told it in my mind. *We're going to be a family. Me and your father and you.*

When I opened my eyes again, my coin on the table was glowing even brighter with golden light.

That was even more encouraging still.

"Hit me," I said again.

"Evie!" Luke roared in anger. When his eyes met mine, they were full of broken glass, dull and colorless. Their pale blue had faded away.

"I'm sorry," I told him. I wasn't sorry for what I'd done, but I was sorry for upsetting him. "Please, though. Trust me."

He could yell at me all he liked.

He had his anger. I had my faith.

As The Fourth gave me yet another card, I tried to brace myself for failure. I couldn't quite manage it, though.

I knew the card was an ace before it even turned over.

Twenty-one.

Luke's chest heaved with relief, but I knew we weren't quite done.

If the Fourth got a twenty-one as well, we'd only have a draw. I didn't know what would happen then.

Probably, we'd have to play again.

And as much faith as I had in that moment, I wasn't eager to push my luck that far.

All but one of the aces was on the table now. Since the dealer's first ace had to be an eleven unless it broke the hand, with The Fourth's eight, that made nineteen.

I wondered whether he would take another card or not. If he didn't, he'd lose automatically.

I had a bad feeling that The Fourth couldn't help but play to win.

He needed a two. Anything more than that, and he'd bust his hand.

There was a two on the table already in my hand. That lowered his chances of getting one, but there were still three more in the deck. One of them could come up at any time.

The Fourth took the hit.

As he turned his card over, my chest cracked with joy.

The fourth ace. It would count as a one. That left The Fourth with a total of twenty, and since all the aces were out on the table now, he had no hopes of getting a twenty-one.

I still couldn't see The Fourth's face from behind his helmet, but somehow, I got the sense that he was smiling at me.

I still didn't really know why. He'd lost, and I'd won.

"Oh, fuck me," Luke groaned with relief. He folded his body over the table, resting his head in his arms. "Jesus, God, and the Holy fucking Spirit. Fuck *me*."

"If it's all the same to you, I'd prefer to be the only one fucking you, handsome." I turned his face toward me, lifting it up from the table so I could see the look in his eyes.

The broken glass was still there, but the blue had started to return as well.

"You did it," he whispered.

"I did." I smiled and placed a kiss on his nose. "Aren't you proud?"

"I'd bloody well have to be." He still looked like he was struggling to believe it. "Are you sure you've never played this before?"

I laughed. Genuinely. "Of course I haven't." If I had, it would have been one hell of a bluff. "Maybe I just had a very good teacher."

"Somehow, I doubt that." Luke wrapped me up in his arms and squeezed me tight. I wasn't sure that he was ever going to let go.

I wasn't sure that I wanted to.

But then, out of the corner of my eye, I saw The Fourth push the white chip with black edges toward us.

"Thank you," I told him.

He merely nodded, picked up his deck, and walked away.

His game was done.

"Let's put this back in you." I picked up the white chip. "Unless you're enjoying slowly withering away in a Vegas casino?"

"Not a damn bit." Luke picked up my gold chip with one hand and cupped my jaw with the other.

We pressed the chips back into each other as our lips met.

Once again, though I didn't know whether Luke could see it or not, I felt that golden light flow all around us.

Like the Almighty Himself was smiling down on us. *Thy will be done.*

“Thank you, darling girl,” Luke whispered against my lips as our kiss finally broke. “That was truly something else.”

“It was, wasn’t it?” A smile tugged at my lips as I took in his face again. His skin was glowing once more. His eyes were piercing blue. He looked healthy. Whole.

Completely healed.

“So, what’s next?” I asked.

“Nothing.” Luke took my hand as he rose from the table. “We lie low. We stay together. We wait.”

“But...” As amazing as that sounded, it was almost a little too good to be true. “Are you sure? The angels are still going to be after you. Shouldn’t we... make a new plan or something?”

“The angels don’t know where we are, love.” Luke pulled my hand to his lips and kissed it. “And don’t think I didn’t see all that golden glowing surrounding you when you put my soul back.”

Shyly, I smiled. “I wondered if you would.”

“The Almighty has finally decided he’s taken a liking to us.” Luke gave an uncertain sigh. “Though I don’t imagine either Heaven or Hell will ever understand why. I certainly don’t. But your faith in Him saved my life. We’re following His plan now.”

“You really think...” It was such good news, I didn’t want to jinx it by saying it out loud.

“I do,” Luke said with a nod. “Between you and the Big Man, you’ve given a gift today. I’m not going to go squandering it by getting too ambitious.”

“So, we just... stay here?” I gestured to the Bellagio’s lobby as we passed out of the casino once more. “We live here until... what, exactly?”

“Until the baby comes, love.” A grin appeared on Luke’s lips. It was so bright, I found myself grinning back at him. “You *are* still excited about it, aren’t you?”

“Of course,” I said immediately. “But...”

“But what?”

“What about the Inferno?” I asked. “What about the Fallen? What about ruling Hell?”

“Rome wasn’t built in a day,” Luke quipped. “And it will take far longer than nine months to burn down Hell. The Fallen aren’t a concern when left to their own devices. They can’t work together to save their

lives, let alone achieve their ends. They'll devolve into infighting soon, if they haven't already. Trust me. That's not a concern you need to have."

"What about..." I was still searching for a catch, but I was struggling to find one.

Without Raph, my advisor, my degree was on hold indefinitely. It hardly felt like it mattered anymore, compared to the future that Luke and I had ahead of us if we were really as safe as he thought. All my classes had already been handed over to other instructors. My parents were safe. My friends were safe.

"I don't know what we'll do without chaos tearing us apart, I guess," I finally said with a tiny laugh.

"Really?" Luke looked amused, if a little concerned. "We'll watch movies together. Eat delicious food. Listen to your favorite records. Dance to them. Write poetry. Read books. We'll *live*, Evie. Not to the full extent that I wish we could, but it will be more of a life than we've ever had together. You'll give our child all the love and care it needs to grow strong inside you and I'll pamper you like the queen you are. Is there something wrong with that?"

"No," I said after a long moment. "That sounds perfect, actually."

For once, nothing was wrong at all.

LUKE

I'd promised her a quiet life of pleasure while we lay low.
I took my promises seriously.

For the next seven months, that was what we had.

"What do you think?" Evie asked, slipping into the bedroom of the suite from the master bath.

She wore a bikini, cherry red, and nothing else—other than the sultry hint of a smile on her crimson lips. She posed in the doorway like a pin-up model. Her tits were full and plump beneath the halter top. Above the tiny bikini bottoms she wore, her belly was round and firm.

When I'd realized that she was pregnant, in the worst moments of my torture, I'd imagined how she might look in a moment just like this. It had seemed so impossible back then, I'd let my mind embellish and fantasize as much as it liked.

But no matter how thrilling my fantasies had gotten—fucking my perfect, pregnant wife on a sailboat in the Mediterranean, making her come for me in the salty waters of the Dead Sea—I knew in an instant that even my wildest fantasies didn't hold a candle to the reality that was her.

As soon as I laid eyes on her, my cock went abruptly and almost painfully hard.

Of all the beautiful things in the world, she was the only one who had ever made me stiff like *that*.

“You look like a fertility goddess,” I murmured darkly. Already, I was undoing my belt.

“Is that what I am to you?” Evie laughed. It was the most exquisite sound I’d ever known. “A goddess?”

“Yes.” I rose from the bed and let my belt clank against my lap. My fingers moved to the button on my trousers, unfastening them. She was a goddess. The only altar I’d ever wanted to kneel at was her lap. “Now, take it off.”

“I thought you wanted me to model my new swimsuits for you,” she pouted. “You don’t like it?”

“I love it,” I assured her, moving closer with care. “Now take it off before I ruin it.”

Smiling, Evie untied the bows against her back and neck. Her breasts spilled out of the top. Her nipples were a darker rose color now. They seemed almost perpetually hard.

“How’s that?” she asked, dropping the top to the floor. “Do I look more or less like a goddess with my top off?”

“More,” I assured her. My zipper hissed as I pulled it down. I nodded to her bottoms next. “*More.*”

By the time they hit the floor, I had her twirled around and pressed up against the wall.

“This is no way to treat a goddess, Luke,” she teased. My hand cupped her belly protectively. She whimpered as my teeth nipped at her neck. “If I’m a goddess, I need to be worshiped. Adored.”

“I worship you.” I slipped a hand beneath her belly and between her legs. My fingers came back slick and covered in her honey. She was already wet for me. “I adore you.”

“You worship your goddess with your cock pressed against her ass, huh?”

I smiled against the nape of her neck. Her scent had always been addictive, but it was even more delicious now. Any time my body was apart from hers felt like a waste. If I couldn’t smell her, I wasn’t nearly close enough.

“Don’t you like it?” I pushed my boxers and trousers down so I could settle my cock in the valley between her ass cheeks. She was so warm—always warm. “I can stop if you want.”

Controlling myself around Evie had only gotten harder and harder during our secret vacation here in the Bellagio. I didn't want to control myself at all anymore—but for her, I'd try.

"Oh, I like it." She arched her back to shove her ass against my cock more firmly. Over her shoulder, she gave me a sultry glance. "I'm just not sure that's how to pay homage to a goddess, is all."

"Mm. Maybe not." In a fluid motion, I bent her over against the wall and folded my body over hers. With a knee, I spread her legs apart. My cock slipped between her cheeks in an instant. Its tip settled against her soaked, hot slit. "Suppose I'll just have to make you my whore instead."

"Your whore?" She laughed, but there was a tremor in it that told me she'd be making other delightful sounds for me. Very soon, if I had any say in the matter. "And what would you do with me as your whore, Luke?"

"Fuck you nice and hard until you begged me to stop." God, how I wanted her. As I felt her honey coat my tip and shaft, I wanted to do exactly that. "I'd have to get my money's worth, wouldn't I?"

"Mm. And what would you pay me in?"

I smirked, slipping my tongue against her neck and gripping her hip a little harder.

"Diamonds," I whispered against her skin. I wanted her. She was dripping wet for me, pregnant with my child, naked and gorgeous and mine. Mine alone. "Gold and silver and more precious jewels than you can name or count."

"And if I didn't ask you to stop?"

I smiled darkly. I loved this little game we played together. Testing boundaries. Learning new things about each other all the time.

Maybe it was time to test another now.

I took my cock in my fist and dragged it upward, from wet heat of her cunt to the tight pucker of her ass.

With my other fist, I gathered up her golden hair and pulled her head back. She was already gasping. Now, she gasped harder still.

"Do you want me to stop now?" I growled, my lips against her ear.

There was a moment where I thought she might say yes. Her lovely body was trembling beneath mine. Her breaths came sharp and short.

If she did want me to stop, I would. I'd been perfectly happy with her cunt up until this point. I didn't *need* to claim every hole.

I might like to, though.

And as she whispered, “No,” my chest rumbled with pleasure. My cock twitched and my entire body went hot with desire in an instant.

She wanted it too.

“Relax for me, darling.” She’d need to, if she was going to have me like this. My cock was long and thick, and her ass was tight enough I wasn’t sure if it could even be taken at all. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

“You can’t hurt me,” she promised. “I’m ready. I need it. I need you.”

God.

What a precious thing she was.

The most precious thing I’d ever known.

My hand left her hair. She wouldn’t be able to take all of me without a little help first. In the absence of lube—something that I’d pick up later if she decided this was something she enjoyed—her honey would have to do.

My fingers slipped between the lips of her pussy, gathering up slickness. I moved them to her ass and worked my fingertips around it in little circles, coating it with her own need.

She shuddered as I pressed a finger in. Just the middle one, to see how she’d take it.

As I stretched out her tight little hole, her entire body shuddered with pleasure.

It seemed she took it well. Almost too well. My cock leapt up at the sight of her reaction. My balls tensed with a need to empty themselves deep inside her.

My entire body roared with a desperation to just take her, then and there, with no more preparation.

I may have become an angel again now, but I’d been an angel right before the Fall too.

Some part of me, however great or small, would always be the Devil.

And god, how I wanted to be the Devil inside her now.

But no, she needed gentleness as much as she needed roughness from me. The things that our bodies wanted weren’t always the things that were best for them.

If it hadn’t been the case, I would have been balls deep in her ass several minutes ago, preparations be damned.

“Do you like the feel of my fingers inside you, love?” I added another as I spoke, pressing into her in slow, focused movements. When I got them

deep enough that they couldn't press any further, I moved them in a come hither motion and spread them apart slightly, stretching her out.

"I... *fuck*, Luke. You know I do." Her knees were shaking as I withdrew my fingers.

Maybe a little too much.

"Come to bed with me then." I raised my fingers to my lips and sucked them into my mouth. Her taste was rich and sweet. When they were clean, I took her hand and pulled her away from the wall. "Get on that mattress. On your hands and knees."

She followed me without a word. No complaints. Her body was still shaking with anticipation. It only made her look that much more beautiful.

I stared at her for a moment from behind. My tongue rolled over my lower lip, suddenly greedy.

I wanted to fuck her so badly, I hurt for it.

But first...

"Hold still," I ordered as I moved behind her on the bed. "Just like that. Don't move."

I spread her ass cheeks with my hands. She had a round, firm ass. Heart-shaped. Gorgeous. I moved my lips between the mounds of it, kissing my way to her pucker. She was still trembling, but she didn't disobey me.

She couldn't. And on top of it, knowing her as well as I did now, I knew she didn't want to.

My tongue slipped against her hole, working in a circle the way my fingers had.

"You're so fucking beautiful, love." I pulled away only for long enough to purr the words at her. "You taste incredible."

Then, I dove right back in.

My tongue pressed into her. I forced it through her tight ring, twisting it until she was gasping for me again. With every flick of it, I could feel her cunt throbbing for me in response.

I pumped my cock in my fist while I claimed her with my tongue. I wanted more than just a taste. Soon, I knew, I'd have it.

She was tense still, but the more I licked at her, the more she eased into the sensation.

Slowly, her gasps turned to whimpers. By the time I finally withdrew my tongue again, her whimpers had turned into coos of delight.

“Do you still want it?” I asked, moving my cock to her ass again.

“More than ever,” she purred back.

And now that she was ready, I had no reason to hold myself back.

I forced my tip inside first. The heat of her was incredible. She was fire, searing and bright. Her ass clenched around my shaft as soon as I was inside, sucking me in deeper still.

With every thrust, her heat engulfed me more and more. It was vibrant and visceral and so tight it nearly took my breath away. My heart pounded hard against my chest as I sank half of my length into her, then three-quarters, then—fucking perfectly—the whole thing, all at once.

“Luke,” she whimpered, full of need.

I folded my body over hers, wrapping my arms around her. I knew exactly what she needed.

She needed me.

“Take me,” I told her. I moved an arm around her ribs and another around her chest, pulling her up so her back was clutched firmly against my chest. “Feel me.”

“I am.” Her voice was shaky and drenched in ecstasy. “I do.”

I took her nipple between the fingers of one hand, pinching and teasing it while I fucked her until she cried out. It only made me want more.

With one arm, I held her. With the other, I caressed her body with a hunger I’d only felt when she was near. I squeezed her breast, let my fingertips roam over the roundness of her belly. I clutched her throat in my palm, gently tightening, then moved my fingers to her clit, stroking it rapidly while my cock plunged into these new depths quick and hard enough to make me sick with pleasure, dizzy with it.

“Yes. Good.” My eyes glinted darkly one last time. I was close enough now that I could let loose inside her at any moment. But I didn’t want to reach that peak of ecstasy alone. Like with everything else, it was always better if she joined me there. “Now, Evie—are you listening to me?”

“Yes,” she panted, leaning her head back to rest it against my shoulder. “Always.”

I bared my teeth in a growl. “Come for me. Come around my fucking cock, you perfect creature. You exquisite thing.” Her body shuddered, ready to obey, and I pressed down on her clit harder as my balls began to tense. “Come!”

And she did. She came gloriously, moaning and whimpering and crying out to the Heavens with pleasure that I felt in the way she throbbed around me and shook against me and reached back to take my hair into her fists so she had something to hold onto through the sensations wracking her body like rogue waves.

It was intense and beautiful. Something completely unhinged and all our own.

I met her in that pleasure with a roar of my own. My cum churned in my balls, rushed up through my shaft and exploded from my tip, shooting inside her like a geyser buried so deep that for a moment I struggled to know where I ended and she began.

When it was finally done—I wasn't sure that the moment would ever end—we collapsed on the mattress together, sweating and rolling and kissing and laughing. My eyes met hers and found grays that sparkled with so much light, I'd write poetry about it in the days to come.

She was goddess and whore and queen and demon.

She was a storm, and I would brave her rain and lightning a thousand times over just to feel the peace I found in that moment again.

She was my love. My wife. The other half of my soul.

I held her in my arms, completely exhausted and intensely happy, until we both fell asleep with our lips against each other's in a kiss that we shared even in our dreams.

EVIE

As we walked into the waiting room of the doctor's office for my checkup, Luke kept his arm around my waist. His eyes scanned the room, searching for danger.

Behind my Elvis glasses, so did mine.

"Do you see anything?" He dipped down to whisper in my ear. "Angels? Demons? Anything else?"

"Nothing," I said. There were no auras in the waiting room. Just normal human women with normal human babies.

It was a relief.

"Good." Luke helped me sit down in a chair in the corner, then went to check me in.

My feet ached and my back was sore, but I was happy. I was happier than I'd ever been in my entire life. Apparently, all it took was seven months in a luxury suite with Luke pampering me to make me shimmer with joy. We hadn't gotten bored of each other. I wasn't even stir crazy. All we did all day was read and fuck and enjoy each other, and that was perfect.

If anything, it was leaving the apparent safety of the Bellagio for these appointments that was the biggest stress in my life. And either Luke was slowly developing agoraphobia... or it unsettled him too.

We hadn't been attacked while we were out in the open like this, but every time we ventured beyond the little world we'd made together, we

always knew there was a chance that we wouldn't be so lucky this time.

"Got your paperwork." Luke waved a clipboard in his hand as he sat down next to me. "I'll fill it out quick, then they say they're ready for us."

"I think I can fill out my own paperwork this time, Luke," I said with a laugh. Luke had been insistent on taking care of everything for me lately. Even checking off boxes for preexisting conditions, as it turned out.

"I know you can. But why should you have to?"

I shrugged. There was no use arguing with him.

Really, it was kind of sweet.

"Are you excited for the ultrasound?" Luke asked as he filled out my name. I liked how his handwriting looked, dark and masculine.

I liked how my first name looked next to his last.

"Always. But I'm nervous, too." I hugged myself and cuddled a little tighter to his arm. He wore a dark t-shirt that really made his biceps pop. They were nice to rest against. So was he.

"Nervous?" Luke looked up from the paperwork. "About what?"

"What if the ultrasound comes out with our baby sporting horns and a tail?"

Luke chuckled. "There won't be horns. Or a tail, either."

"How do you know?"

"I still remember when Mal and Don were born. Both full demons, mind." Luke sucked the end of the pen between his lips for a moment, then went back to filling out my details on the clipboard. "They both came out looking perfectly normal. You don't need to worry about *that*."

"Well... good." I gave a little sigh of relief. "And you don't think when the baby grows up, it's going to start murdering its nannies and making birds break their necks against the windowpanes?"

Luke snorted. "When we watched *The Omen*, I warned you it wouldn't be like that."

"Still." I moved my hands to cradle my belly. The little flame inside it was growing bigger and stronger with every passing day. "This baby feels like... like someone important. Is that silly? I guess every mother probably feels like that."

Luke finished off the paperwork, then turned to me with a gentle smile.

"I think our child could bring great change to the world, love. Change that it needs. We'll raise it to be sweet and noble and kind, just like their

mother.” His eyes glimmered wickedly. “And to dispatch their enemies with all of my fury, too.”

“How many enemies could a baby possibly have?” I asked—but then I remembered who Luke was, and who I was. “Oh. Wait. Never mind.”

“Most importantly, we’ll raise this baby with love,” said Luke. “That’s all that any parent can do.”

“We don’t even know where we’re going to raise him or her at all, though.” Luke still couldn’t come back to Hell. Neither of us was safe in Heaven. And as nice as the last seven months had been, the Bellagio on the Vegas Strip was hardly a place to raise a child.

“We’ll figure it out,” Luke said. “We always do.”

From the door to the exam rooms, a nurse called my name. Luke helped me up from my chair and guided me to her. He handed off my chart with a charming smile.

“Everything is looking good,” the nurse told us after she’d taken my blood pressure and a few other vitals. “All that’s left is the ultrasound. The two of you still want to keep the sex of the baby a surprise, right?”

“I think it’ll be a boy,” Luke said. He gave my hand a kiss. “Evie says girl.”

“We’re waiting until he or she is born until we find out,” I told the nurse. “That way, if Luke is right, he’ll be too excited to be smug about it and I’ll be too doopey and exhausted to smack him if he starts saying *I told you so*.”

The nurse laughed. “First child, right?”

I nodded.

Part of me was even beginning to hope it wouldn’t be our last.

The nurse smiled at the screen when she did the ultrasound. “This is going to be one cute baby. If I didn’t know any better, I’d say they just winked at me.” She looked between Luke and me. “Not possible, of course.”

“No,” Luke agreed earnestly. He gave me a sly wink when the nurse looked away. “Of course not.”

“And it still looks healthy?” I asked. *No tail? No horns?*

“Perfectly,” the nurse assured me. She wiped the ultrasound gel from my belly and moved the machine aside. “Absolutely nothing to worry about. I’ll send the doctor in, then the two of you should be free to go.”

The nurse left us alone together. Luke gave my hand a squeeze as he stared up at me from his chair.

“Relieved?”

“No horns, no tail,” I said with a shrug. “I’ll take it.”

“Mm. And when we get back to the Bellagio, I’ll take—”

Luke’s voice cut off abruptly as the door opened again.

I was expecting Dr. Peters, my OB/GYN, but the man who came through the door couldn’t have been more different from the kind-faced elderly woman who’d been monitoring me through this pregnancy.

Immediately, any relief I’d felt dissipated.

Now, the only feeling left inside me was the intense, urgent need to run.

“Well. Fancy seeing the two of you here.” Michael wore a lab coat and a name tag like he was really part of the medical staff here, but if he was a doctor, I was a fucking saint. “Congratulations on the baby, by the way. Sorry I didn’t send a card.”

“Leave.” Luke rose to his feet and put his body between Michael’s and my own. Already, he held balls of celestial light in his hands. He was ready to fight.

So was I.

I flicked my fingers out, conjuring infernal flames of my own.

“Calm down.” Michael spoke like Luke and I were the ones who were being unreasonable. His tone would have been laughable if, beneath my anger, I hadn’t been so afraid. “I’m not here to hurt you. I’m here to talk.”

“Forgive me if I find that hard to believe,” Luke growled. His chest rose and fell heavily. I had no doubt his heart was racing, flushed with adrenaline. “The last time you and I had a little chat, you were carving tally marks into my chest with cursed steel blades.”

Luke was right to doubt Michael. I couldn’t imagine the pain that he’d been through at Michael’s hands. But I’d seen the aftermath. Every wound that Michael had inflicted on him, I’d had to heal.

“A necessary punishment for your crimes against Heaven,” Michael said dismissively. “I’m not here to talk about old wounds, adversary—though I do wonder how you were able to heal them all, I have to admit. Frankly, I was surprised to learn you were alive at all. When you were taken from Paradise, I was certain your soul was forfeit. Or is death slacking on collecting his dues now?”

“We had a good turn of luck.” Luke didn’t back down. The light in his hands only sizzled hotter. “If you want to talk, talk. But know that my patience with you is running thin. I may not be able to kill you here, but I can certainly make you hurt.”

“I’ll be brief, then.” Michael shrugged as he strode into the room. “I’m here to talk about the child.” He turned his gaze to my belly, then met my eyes. “You have realized what will happen if it’s born, haven’t you?”

“Archangel,” Luke snarled, low and with warning.

Michael laughed cruelly. “Oh, no. He hasn’t told you about the prophecy yet, has he?”

“Prophecy?” I looked at Luke, but he couldn’t risk taking his eyes off Michael right now. “No... is there one?”

“The son of Satan will bring about the end of days. Surely, you’ve watched enough movies and read enough books to have heard that one before, Evelyn.” Michael clicked his tongue at me, shaking his head. “Quite ignorant of you if you haven’t, really.”

“I’m hardly Satan anymore,” Luke snapped back at Michael. “And you’ve twisted those words to suit your own narrative.”

“Has he?” I let the flames fade from my hands and pressed a palm to Luke’s shoulder. “What does the prophecy say?”

“Only that any child of mine will be the source of great change,” said Luke. He sounded certain. “It doesn’t say anything about good or evil. He’s lying.”

“I’m not,” Michael said simply. He sounded just as sure as Luke. “Come back to Heaven with me and I’ll show you the scrolls myself.”

“Yeah, that’s not gonna happen.” I stared Michael down over Luke’s shoulder. Luke had never given me a reason not to trust him. Michael had never given me a reason to trust him at all. “Who made this prophecy? Where did these scrolls come from?”

And why were they so concerned with my baby? A child that wouldn’t even be born for two more months?

“A set of scrolls were delivered to Hell not long after the Fall,” Luke said over his shoulder to me. “The other Fallen had only recently picked their way across the Earth and reconvened. You and I had already fallen in love.” He glared daggers at Michael. “The same set of scrolls was delivered to the angels. Michael’s been using the predictions written in

them to justify hunting you down ever since. Never could accept the idea of change, could you?"

"Because they're true, adversary." Michael's temper flared up at Luke's suggestion. "The world needs order. You and your Lilith upend it. The prophecy is *very* clear on that matter. The son of the adversary and a human woman will plunge the Earth into chaos and bring about its end." Michael turned his gaze to me. "Is that baby in your belly worth that? You'll lose everything you love here on Earth. Everyone, too."

"He's *lying*." Luke's lips pulled back to bare his teeth. "Don't listen to him, Evie. He's trying to manipulate you. You know I love the Earth as much as you do. I wouldn't do anything to put it in jeopardy. Destroying the world would hurt you too much."

"I believe you," I said.

I did.

"Then once again, you've fallen prey to yet another falsehood from the Father of Lies himself." Michael shook his head patronizingly. "You really aren't a very clever girl. Never have been, I suppose."

"Then I s'pose I'm lucky I'm so pretty." I fought back an eye roll.

This was the person who'd repeatedly destroyed my life over the entire course of human history, after all. I didn't care if Michael thought I was clever or not.

"I didn't come here to argue with the two of you either," Michael said with a heavy sigh. "If you need proof, you only have to turn on the news at this point. You *have* been watching the news, haven't you?"

Luke and I exchanged a brief glance.

We really hadn't.

We'd been a little busy doing other things—like living the life we'd been denied through every other reincarnation cycle. For the last seven months, Luke and I had been in our own little world with little contact to the outside. We'd been happy with it.

After thousands of years of fighting angels and fate, watching the news had been the last thing on our minds.

"Typical," Michael scoffed. "Then allow me to fill you in. There's peace on the West Bank."

"And that's a problem for you?" As much as I knew Michael despised me, it was hard to believe that the angels really had an issue with the general idea of something like *peace*, for fuck's sake.

“And talk of war breaking out in Canada,” Michael added. “The world is being turned on its head. It has been, ever since the child was conceived. And if this is what the baby is doing to the fabric of reality while it’s still in the womb, imagine what it will do once it’s born. Once it’s grown.”

“It’s just a baby,” I insisted. “It’s not *doing* anything yet. Let alone manipulating geo-politics.”

“If that’s what you need to tell yourself,” said Michael. “But you’re wrong.”

“I’m not letting you kill our child, Michael.” Luke’s hand reached for mine. I squeezed his fingers tight. “You’re the one who’s wrong. Once again, you’re just trying to justify your own hatred for us. You ought to be ashamed of yourself. Honestly, killing babies doesn’t really seem like Heaven’s style.”

“You’re right on that count, at least,” Michael allowed. “I don’t want to kill the child. But when it’s born, you need to understand that the baby must be taken to Heaven. As an innocent, it won’t be harmed there. It can be raised by the angels in a place where it won’t be able to harm the Earth—and Evelyn must be rendered infertile, so this won’t happen again.”

“No,” Luke and I said in unison.

Luke added a solid, “And fuck you for suggesting it,” for emphasis, too.

“What about this are the two of you not understanding? Has love really rendered you so blind?” Michael paced the room in front of us, bristling with frustration. “You’ve painted me the villain in your narrative. I understand why. But through all these years of bloodshed, I’ve only been trying to prevent *this*.” He gestured wide. “My job is to maintain balance on Earth. Upheaval on this level will tear apart this realm you both claim to love so much.” He met my gaze, then Luke’s. His eyes were shining with something genuine for once. “I love it too, believe it or not. I don’t want to see it end because a fallen angel and silly human insisted on having a child together. Not when there’s a simple solution to stop it. I’m begging you both—see reason here. You don’t have to like it, but you can’t just close your eyes to reality. No love is worth this kind of loss.”

For a moment, I almost believed him. Or, at least, I believed that *he* believed what he was doing was right.

But through so many of my lifetimes, all Luke and I had known was loss.

Would Luke really have continued to fight for us if he'd known that winning would bring about the end of everything else?

No. He wouldn't have. I knew him better than that.

"Your sincerity is endearing, Michael. But you forget—I've read the same prophecy that you have," Luke said after a moment of silence. "I don't know why you insist on twisting it. Change isn't destruction. It's only change. Think of all the suffering that's happened in this world since its inception. Murder and war and atrocities beyond measure. Hasn't it ever struck you that change is exactly what Earth needs?"

Slowly, Michael shook his head. "I can tell that you're not going to see reason. So let me offer you this instead. You held Evelyn against her will in the Inferno on the morning after your wedding. Your end of our great bargain has been forfeited since that moment."

"A technicality," Luke scoffed. "She only wanted to leave because you had one of your agents steal her memory, you bastard. She didn't know what was at stake."

"And when Raphael attacked Evelyn at her coronation, our end of the deal was broken as well," Michael went on, disregarding Luke's words completely. "Humans on Earth can be harmed by angels and demons alike now. I have no interest in harming a pregnant woman—and Evelyn is hardly human anymore, anyway. But..." Michael's eyes glinted darkly.

I swallowed hard. I knew where this was going. I didn't like it.

"You're going to try to harm the people that Evie loves," Luke guessed. "How typical of you. And you call *me* the evil one."

"What are the lives of a few humans compared to the billions of lives that will be lost when that child ends the world?" Michael shrugged. "I only do what I must. If that means killing off Evelyn's friends and family members one by one until I know the Earth is safe..."

"We'll fight back." Rage welled up within me as the fire in my womb crackled, angry and hot. My parents—Bea, Ava and Joan—they hadn't done anything wrong. They were innocent in all of this too. "Target them, and we'll make you pay."

"I'm sure you'll try." Michael snorted. "You know, this would have all been so much easier if you'd just let Azrael take you both. I'm still not sure how you managed it, honestly. You were supposed to lose. Your failure to do so created an inconvenience for me. One that will cost you dearly, I'm afraid."

“I won Luke’s soul back honestly,” I insisted. “Unless...”

I wondered how Michael even knew of our card game at all.

“You engineered that, didn’t you?” asked Luke. “That’s why you let me be taken from Paradise. You knew it doomed me, and you knew Evie would gamble with her own soul to try to save me.”

“Azrael must have realized the deck my agents planted for him was stacked. Pity. He switched it out for his own, didn’t he?”

I remembered the way The Fourth had changed decks right before we’d played the round of cards that had let me win Luke’s soul back.

He had.

Part of me wondered if The Fourth hadn’t stacked that deck himself.

“Ah, it doesn’t matter now, I suppose,” Michael said when neither of us answered him. “I’ll give you a day to think all of this over. I hope you use it to think long and hard about all you have to lose if you refuse this offer. Tomorrow night, you’ll meet me outside the Inferno. Either to agree to give me that child in your belly when its born...” Michael nodded to my baby bump. Beneath my skin, my womb felt full of wildfire, ready for a fight. “Or we make war all over again. Just like we’ve always done in the past. And as in the past—Heaven will prevail.”

“Not this time.” Luke let go of my hand and took a step forward. “The Almighty has plans for Evie and that child, Michael. I’ve seen it myself. Oppose us—try to hurt them—and you’ll be directly disregarding His will.”

“Yes, I’m sure the Almighty just *adores* having lengthy chat about His plans with the adversary and his whore.” Michael’s voice dripped with venom. “Your pride will be your downfall once again, Lucifer. And once that’s assured, this time, I’m not going to stop with just winning the battle.” He smiled. “I’m going to conquer Hell itself and put an end of to this chaos once and for all.”

EVIE

Back in our suite at the Bellagio, Luke was furious.
I didn't blame him.
I was pretty pissed off myself.

"This was his end game all along, the *bastard*." Luke paced the floor in front of the bed as I sat on it, feeling more helpless than I had in a long time. "That's why he's pretending to have misinterpreted the prophecy. He's always hated that I survived the Fall. When I conquered Hell, he hated it even more. And now, he's finally shown his hand. The real one."

"Why does he want so badly to destroy you?" Maybe I was naive, but as much as I knew the angels were our enemies, Michael's intentions seemed more incongruous with the values of Heaven all the time. "He says he wants order and balance. Surely Heaven and Hell balance each other out, don't they?"

"He's never liked that I disagreed with him about free will." Luke raked his fingers through his hair. "But you have a point. He's not stupid. Conquering Hell would throw all three realms out of balance entirely. Either he's gone mad with power—entirely possible—"

"Or he thinks he knows something that we don't." I shifted back onto the pillows and ran my hands over my belly until the thin cotton nightgown I'd changed into when we got back from the appointment lay smooth over it. "He seemed pretty certain that his interpretation of that prophecy was right."

“He’s always certain that he’s right.” Luke scoffed. “And he thinks *I’m* the one with a pride problem.”

“You said that Heaven and Hell were both given sets of those scrolls,” I pointed out. “No one has any idea who wrote them, though?”

“Not exactly,” Luke admitted. “There was no name to go along with them. I assumed it was the Almighty himself, alerting us of his will. His plan.”

“And Michael is probably working under the same assumption. But...” I bit my lip. “Luke, have you ever read the scrolls that Heaven received?”

“No,” said Luke. “Of course not. As you may recall, I spent my entire time in Heaven tortured by angels while nailed to a cross, love. There wasn’t exactly time to do any light reading.”

“I know.” I patted the bed next to me tentatively. Luke had every right to be frustrated right now, but all his pacing was making me nervous. “Come here, though.”

Luke stopped in his tracks, turned to me, and sighed.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to be flippant with you.” He moved onto the bed beside me and draped an arm around my shoulders so I could cuddle against his chest. “None of this is your fault.”

“It’s okay,” I said. “I... actually don’t think it is.”

Before I met Luke, I would have found some way to feel guilty about all of this. He’d once said that my greatest sin was believing that I was the thing that was wrong in the world. At the time, he was probably right. But being with him had changed me. I was more confident now than I’d ever been before.

Now, I was beginning to wonder if all the tragedy in our lives might have been someone else’s fault entirely.

Not Luke’s. Not even Michael’s. And certainly not the Almighty’s.

“Michael seems so sure that our baby will end the world,” I whispered against Luke’s chest.

“Just as certain as I am that it won’t,” Luke agreed. “It’s never made sense to me. The prophecy doesn’t say anything about an ending. Only something new.”

“Is it possible that Heaven received... a different set of scrolls?” I asked.

Luke was quiet for a moment. “Yes. I suppose that could be true. Without reading them, I’d have no way of knowing.”

“If you don’t know who sent them... maybe they weren’t from the Almighty at all.” That was a scary notion. It meant that either Michael or Luke could be right about this baby. Or maybe, they were both completely wrong. “Maybe someone has been fucking with you both. Pulling the strings behind the scenes this whole time.”

“That’s not very reassuring, love.” Luke buried his face in my hair and sighed. “But yes. Now that you mention it, it would explain so much. Everything, maybe.”

“And it would mean that all this time, Heaven wasn’t really the enemy at all.” I shifted to look up at him. There was a cool sadness in the blues of his eyes. “Someone might have been playing us. All of us. Pitting you and Michael against each other for their own gain.”

“But who?” Luke’s brow furrowed. “Heaven and Hell have been warring on Earth over our love since shortly after it began. I don’t know who would benefit from it.”

“One of the gods from the other pantheons, maybe?”

“No.” Luke shook his head. “They have their own relationships with Earth. Our conflicts don’t overlap.”

“So, it’s someone that we know, then.” That was a harrowing thought. But if all the pantheons of gods that supposedly existed in our universe operated independently of each other, there was no other option. “Someone in Heaven or Hell that’s getting something out of conflict between the two.”

“I’m sure you’re right. But I don’t know who that would be.” Luke cupped my cheek in his hand and turned my lips up toward his. “And for the moment, it doesn’t matter. Michael has issued an ultimatum. If we don’t give him what he wants, he’s going to go through with it.”

“And if he conquers Hell... there won’t be anywhere for me to hide from him.” All this time, we’d been operating under the assumption that if I was in danger, I could always retreat to the Inferno or Pandemonium for safety. But if Hell fell to Heaven, that wouldn’t be an option anymore.

One way or another, Michael would hunt me down eventually.

He’d done it in every other life that Luke and I had shared.

He’d do it in this one, too. And in every other life I’d had, Michael had always managed to win.

“We’ll just have to win.” Luke’s lips found mine. His mouth moved soothingly against my own, but I could tell in that kiss he was holding

himself back. He pulled away from it far too soon. “You’ll need to pack your things, love. Quickly, I think. I want you back in Pandemonium before nightfall.”

“Why?” I frowned. “I don’t want to be away from you. Surely there’s something we can do—someone we can turn to—”

But I didn’t know who that would be. We had the same allies we’d always had. So did Michael. And if the gods from the other pantheons wouldn’t get wrapped up in our affairs...

Nothing had changed. Not really. In these beautiful months that Luke and I had spent together, I’d often hoped that things would be different this time, but they weren’t.

Heaven and Hell would do battle over my life once again.

And once again, Michael would find a way to end me. This time, maybe, for good.

“When Michael comes for our answer tomorrow, he’ll bring Heaven’s army with him,” said Luke. “When I tell him to shove his offer up his arse, there’s going to be war. I’m going to rally the Fallen and the forces of Hell. We’ve been preparing for an assault of this scale from Heaven ever since I took control of Below. Now, we’ll finally see how prepared we really are.”

“I should be there with you, then,” I pleaded with him. My fingers curled against his chest, clutching at his shirt. “Let me fight by your side. There’s too much at stake, Luke. We’re going to need everyone who can fight Heaven on deck if we want to win.”

“You’re pregnant, Evie.”

“I know that!” As if my swollen feet and my aching nipples and the flames in my big, round belly allowed me to forget. “But—”

“On the battlefield, you’ll only be a liability.” Luke shook his head and pulled me close to him. “I need you safe in Hell’s center, as far away from the battle as you can get.”

“But if you lose—”

“I won’t lose.”

“If you do, though.” I pulled away from Luke to stare into his eyes again. “Heaven will conquer Hell. They’ll claim it for themselves. And I’m not a human anymore, remember? I’m infernal. If Hell becomes Heavenly ground while I’m there inside it...”

“You’ll burn. I know.” Luke rested his forehead against mine. His gaze was intense with passion. “That’s why we’re not going to lose.”

“Okay,” I said softly. There was nothing else to say. “And my parents? My friends?”

“They’ll go to Pandemonium with you. We need them safe as well.”

“I hate all of this.” I buried my face in Luke’s chest. His arms wrapped around me tighter, but there was little comfort to be found in them.

All I’d wanted through all of this was a fucking chance. I wanted the people we loved to be safe. I wanted our family. I wanted *him*.

We’d never been allowed any of it. Ever since we’d met, from our first meeting right up through this latest one, we’d been threatened. We’d been torn apart again and again.

It didn’t feel fair. I knew that was just life sometimes, but did it have to be how our lives worked *every* time?

“I hate it too, love,” Luke’s lips murmured against the crown of my head. “You’re not alone.”

“I feel alone. If we lose this battle, you’re not just losing me this time. If Heaven conquers Hell and I burn in it... I’m not human anymore, Luke. There won’t be another reincarnation where we can try again. I’ll lose you too.”

It was all becoming too much to bear.

“You’re never alone, Evie. You still have me now. We still have a chance. And remember, you have your parents and your friends, too. They love you. *I* love you.” Luke pulled back to stare down at me again. “Can I show you something?”

“Another memory?” I wasn’t sure how that would help anything, but I was curious. “What’s it going to be this time? Me being murdered in Carthage? Having my throat slit by angels during the Civil War?”

“You’ve had too many bad memories brought back to you,” Luke soothed. He smoothed my hair down around my face. “Let me show you a good one. One of mine.”

“Which?” I asked. “It’s hard for any of them to be good when I know how they all end.”

Dying. Death and more death, over and over again without fail.

“Not this one,” Luke promised. “I want to show you the first time I saw you in this life.”

“In Limbo? That bar in the Inferno?” I touched the place where Luke had kissed my cheek. The little white star he’d left on my skin was still there, like a pale beauty mark.

“No,” he said with a gentle smile. “That wasn’t the first time. This was.”

He kissed me, hard and fast, and in an instant, I was whisked away.

LUKE

Somewhere In A Memory...

Atlantic City, New Jersey

As I moved through the Save A Lot, I tucked my hands into my pockets and kept my head low.

I was trying not to look suspicious, but that wasn't exactly easy right now. For one thing, I needed to keep a low profile today.

For another, it was hard not to look like absolute creep as I followed a mother and her child through aisles.

It was an inherently creepy act. I might have been the Devil himself, but even I knew that.

My intentions, on the other hand, were perfectly pure for once.

Belial had tipped me off. She was certain that the child was my Lilith. A little girl who would someday grow up into a woman that I would make my bride.

If she was right, we were in luck.

If I could find out for sure, I'd be able to offer her more protection this time around than I'd ever been able to give her before.

I'd moved here to Atlantic City from Vegas so I could keep an eye on her. Ever since, I'd been watching her from afar. If Belial had clocked that

this might be the next incarnation of Lilith, then the angels might have realized it as well.

So young, and already her life was in danger. I wouldn't speak with her, nor would I intervene in her life in any way. Not until she was older. But until then...

I sighed as I trailed behind them, following the thick waves of the little girl's long blonde hair.

I wanted to be sure, and I couldn't quite keep myself away until I knew.

This Evie was... adorable, in a word. She'd been babbling excitedly to her mother about all the books she'd been reading lately ever since they entered the store.

I had no way of knowing whether she'd keep that white-blond hair of hers as she grew up, or if it would darken into a pretty brown. It would be lovely, I knew, either way.

It always was.

She'd grow into a great beauty, if she really was the new Lilith. Someday, she'd become the love of my life.

But right now, she was just an innocent. A child. One that I needed to protect from danger if anyone else caught her in their sight as well.

"Can we buy one?" Evie asked, tugging on her mother's hand as they reached the checkout. With her other hand, she was pointing at a rack of books near the candy bars. "Just one. Pretty please? Pretty please, please, please?"

"Oh, princess," her mother sighed. "No, we can't afford any more books right now."

"Aww! But *please!*" Evie pointed at one book in particular, a paperback. I couldn't see yet which one it was. "I *really* want that one! It looks like it would be good!"

"Tell you what, hon. We'll go to the library tomorrow. Memorize the name, and I'll ask the librarian to find it for us."

Evie bent down to study the book's cover closely. "Charlotte's Web. By... E.B. White." She nodded decisively. "I won't forget."

"When it comes to books, you never do," her mother said with a tired laugh.

I wanted to step forward and offer to pay for it all—the groceries and the book alike. Every little thing I learned about Evie made me surer that

Belial had made the right call.

My Lilith had always loved stories. I'd told her the first ones, making them up as I went, in front of the first fire the Earth had ever known—one I'd set to light with a flaming sword stolen from the gates of Eden itself.

When I'd lost her, I'd invented the written word, then encouraged along the conception of the printing press. That way, no matter how long it took me to find her, she'd always have stories to keep her company until I could make her mine again.

But before I could reach for my wallet, I caught a dark flash out of the corner of my eye. There was another man drawing near. He was big and look hardened. The tattoos on his neck and beneath one eye looked like the kind that only a stint in prison could produce. One was a crooked set of wings, like a fly's, placed just below his ear. He had a pile of gold coins inked beneath his jawline and a twisted dragon symbol over his throat.

The leather jacket on his shoulders and the gold chain around his neck gave me an idea of how he'd ended up in prison to begin with.

A mobster—a made man. Or, more likely, one of their thugs.

His gaze was focused with intent on the little girl and her mother piling groceries onto the conveyor belt before the checkout.

Same as mine was.

I slipped into line behind Evie and her mother, placing my body between this man's and theirs. As I suspected he would, he got in line behind me.

He was close enough now that I could feel the sin coming off of him. Along with it was the palpable promise that he was planning to sin some more—and soon, too.

As I realized I had nothing for the clerk to ring up, I dipped down to grab the copy of Charlotte's Web that Evie had been eyeing.

Even if she wasn't my Lilith, I liked the idea of giving the little girl who reminded me so much of my love something nice to read tonight.

Once Evie's mother had paid for their groceries, I engaged the clerk with some clever chit-chat. She was an elderly woman who looked like she'd spent all day tired and bored. She was all too happy to talk—something interesting to help pass the time.

I handed off the cash for the book. I knew that time was what I was really buying right now. The man behind me shifted from one foot to the

other, anxious to get going as Evie and her mother disappeared out the supermarket's doors.

As the clerk handed me the book again, the man's patience wore too thin. He shoved past me and rushed out the doors.

I followed close behind. Whatever he wanted with little Evie and her mother, I knew it wouldn't amount to anything good.

I might have been the King of Sin, but I was hardly going to allow an innocent little girl to come to harm when I had every ability to prevent it. Whether she was my Lilith or not.

Outside, the man had Evie's mother cornered in the parking lot near a beat-up blue car. They were arguing—I couldn't hear about what.

But as the man grabbed for Evie's arm, I knew I wasn't going to let him get any closer to fulfilling his goal than he already had.

"That's not very polite of you, lad." I grabbed the man by his shoulder and spun him around, breaking his grip on Evie's arm. "Did you leave your manners at home today or did no one ever teach you any to begin with?"

"Fuck off," the man snarled at me.

Not a very clever quip, to be honest.

Luckily, I'd prepared a response in advance.

My fist.

I swung for him before he even realized what was happening. My knuckles cracked hard against his jaw. A look of surprise flashed through his eyes for a moment.

In the next moment, he hit the pavement. Knocked out cold.

"Go inside and ask the cashier to call the police," I told Evie's mother. "I don't know what kind of trouble you're in, but I imagine it will only get worse from here on out. I'll watch the girl and make sure he doesn't get back up."

Evie's mother blinked, then did as I asked. She wouldn't have left Evie alone with me if I hadn't suggested it, which inspired a great deal of faith in her for me.

But the fact of the matter was, I needed to see the girl's eyes to know if she was my Lilith or not—and when I wanted to, I could be a very persuasive man.

"Are you all right?" I asked Evie, crouching down so I could talk to her on her level. "Did he hurt you?"

"No," Evie said, frowning. "I'm okay, I think."

Then, she turned and gave the man a solid kick in his side. When her tiny trainer connected with his gut, its sole lit up with flashing pink lights.

"There," said Evie, nodding with satisfaction. "Now he's hurt instead."

"Yes," I said with a chuckle, impressed with how fierce she was. And at such a young age, too. "I imagine he is."

"Do you think he's dead?" Evie's eyes sought out mine.

My heart pounded in realization. Her eyes were rimmed with thick lashes. They were as gray as the sky before a storm.

In an instant, I knew.

She was back.

It was *her*.

"No," I admitted. "But I think he'll be very unhappy when he finally wakes up."

"He should be," Evie said with venom. "I didn't like him one bit."

"Good instincts," I told her.

It was a struggle not to laugh at how angry she looked. Indignance on the face of such a young child was always such a funny thing to see, but I knew she wouldn't appreciate being laughed at in her moment of righteous anger.

My Lilith never did.

"I want you to have this, Evie." I held out the book for her. "As a reward for how ferociously you fought today."

"Charlotte's Web!" Her eyes lit up as she took the book in hand. "Oh, I love it, I love it! Thank you, thank you, thank you!" She hugged it to her chest like it was long-lost friend. "It's *perfect*!"

Finally, I couldn't fight back the laugh anymore.

"You deserve it," I said, giving her a pat on the head. "I hope you love it just as much when it's done."

"I'll read it until it falls apart," Evie assured me. "Over and over again. I promise I will."

"You'd better." I glanced over my shoulder and saw her mother coming back out of the store. In the distance, I could hear the wail of police sirens coming our way. Time to take my leave. "Now. If anyone asks, I was never here. Our little secret, okay?"

"Our little secret." Evie gave me a serious nod. "I'll tell the cops *I* knocked him out. Bam!"

I grinned as I straightened. She really was something, wasn't she?
"You do just that."

As I walked away, I felt a sudden, almost holy rush of hope.

I knew I'd meet her again someday.

I knew someday, when she was older and a woman grown, I'd fall in love with her all over again.

But until then, I was glad that I could show her the small kindness of that gift. A simple book that had made her whole face light up just like the soles of her trainers.

Today, I'd kept her safe.

And I'd keep her safe tomorrow, too.

Every day, from this moment on, for the rest of her life.

EVIE

As Luke's memory faded away and the present came flooding back in, I pulled back from the kiss, a little in awe.

"That was you," I said softly, blinking.

"You remember?" Luke sounded surprised. "I was so sure you'd forgotten."

"No, I don't remember that day. But the book... it's the one you picked up in my room, back when we were visiting my parents." He'd been so charmed by it at the time, I remembered. Now, I knew why. "Why didn't you tell me then?"

"I was saving it for a special moment, I suppose." Luke sighed. "Shame I've had to spend it on a tragic one instead."

"I'm glad you showed me." So many of our most tender moments had been in preparation for tragic ones. They always had been. "I read that book from cover to cover so many times, the spine broke, you know."

"I saw." Luke chuckled. "Looked like you dropped it in the bath a time or two as well."

"More, probably."

"Good." He nodded with approval. "Then it was well-loved."

"Were you really watching over me for my entire childhood, though?" I frowned. "I thought you said you lost track of me until we met again in Limbo that night."

“I meant to keep an eye on you, yes. But it wasn’t in the cards. That man, the one who attacked you and your mother, was some sort of mobster.”

“Part of the mob that Dad managed to piss off, you think?” My parents still didn’t really talk about the chain of events that led us from moving away from New Jersey to Vermont. I’d been too young for them to explain it to me at the time. When I got old enough to ask about, they hadn’t really been generous with details. I’d always figured it was a part of their past they were happier to leave behind them. “We would have moved to Vermont with witness protection not long after while Dad waited for the trial against them to start.”

“It would make sense,” Luke agreed. “What doesn’t make sense is how you disappeared so completely from me in the process. I looked for you, you know. But...” He shrugged and squeezed me up tight in his arms. “You were gone.”

“You think it was the angels?”

“Maybe once.” Luke’s face was grim. “You were only a child. I thought your youth might have protected you from them if they’d found you as well. They don’t always try to kill you, you know.”

“Sometimes, they just try to marry me off to an Adam again instead.” My engagement to Adam felt more ridiculous than ever now. Part of me wondered if the reason I’d agreed to it in the first place was because Michael and Gabriel hadn’t managed to warp my brain into thinking it was a good idea. If my memories could be taken from me, anything was possible, I supposed. “Think they helped hide me away somewhere you couldn’t find?”

“I’m less sure now. You saw the tattoos on that thug’s neck, didn’t you? Demonic, some of those were. I was so focused on you, I hardly thought about it at the time, but seeing them again just now...”

“Could one of the Fallen have orchestrated that attack?” It was a possibility. Not exactly a reassuring one, though.

The Fallen were supposed to be our allies, not our enemies. But given how they’d responded to Luke’s return to Heaven...

Now more than ever, I was less certain of where they stood.

“Anything is possible. If it was, I doubt it was all of them. They can’t work together. They don’t know how.”

“Which means that it was just one.” I bit my lip, wondering if their reactions to his absence in Hell were worth mentioning. Probably. No secrets between soul mates, right? “Belial wanted to hold an orgy the morning after you left for Heaven, you know. All Mammon wanted to talk about was business, and Beelzebub...”

“Did he try to propose to you?”

I blinked, staring up at him. “Yes, actually. How did you guess?”

“They all want you in their own ways. I’ve long suspected that if I wasn’t around, Zeb might try to put a ring of his own on your finger instead.” Luke’s brow twitched. His eyes glinted with a sudden darkness. “If we weren’t already drowning in enemies from Heaven, I’d toss him into the deepest pits of Hell and laugh as he struggled to claw his way out for even dreaming he could make you his.”

“I love when you talk dirty to me,” I sighed, trailing my fingers down his chest.

“I’ll remember that when all this is over, then.” Luke caught my fingers and drew them up to his lips instead. The kiss he pressed to them was firm and sweet, but when he lowered my hand, his mouth was set with grim determination. “But right now, we need to get you somewhere safe. It’s time to pack. Then, we have to go.”

“I know,” I said. “But I was thinking, if—”

“You can’t come with me tomorrow, love.” Luke sounded like he regretted it, but he also didn’t sound like he was willing to discuss the subject. “This battle we’ll be fighting—and it *will* come to blows when I tell Michael to politely go fuck himself—isn’t just for your safety, remember. It’s for this, too.”

He dipped down to kiss my belly. Beneath it, the flame wasn’t just a flame anymore. It was becoming a real thing now. It punched and kicked and sometimes even hiccupped inside me.

“I’ll keep you safe,” Luke swore. “And you’ll keep our baby safe. That’s the deal. All right?”

“I don’t like the idea of you dying up in the streets of Las Vegas while I’m tucked away in Pandemonium, sitting on my hands.” I pursed my lips. “It doesn’t seem like a very good deal.”

“I know, love.” Luke rose from the bed and offered me his hand. “But it’s the only game in town.”

THIS TIME, when we flew to Hell, we did it together. My wings still felt a little clumsy and uncertain, but when they faltered, Luke was there to catch me beneath my arms and hold me aloft until I got my bearings again.

"Thank you," I said as my heart fluttered in my chest. "This really isn't any time to be falling, huh?"

"No," Luke agreed from above me. His wings flapped over us, broad and steady and pristinely white. I focused on matching their beat until my black wings moved like dark shadows beneath his. "But you know that I'd never let you fall."

Up ahead, the air shimmered over the rooftop of the version of the Inferno visible from the Vegas Strip. It was the same portal that Luke had flown me through in his helicopter so many times. An entryway that allowed us to pass from Earth into the upside-down version of the Inferno. The real one.

The one that was situated in Hell.

"You should leave me here." I unfolded Luke's fingers from beneath my arms and flew forward quickly. I stopped in front of him, hovering in front of the portal so he couldn't pass through. "You'll burn if you enter Hell again, and if you're really going to fight Heaven tomorrow, you're going to need all the strength you can get."

"This might be the last time we'll see each other for a little while, love." Luke flew to me, hovering as well, and took my hands in his. "I don't care if I burn for it."

I knew what he meant by *a little while*. It was a stand-in for the thing he couldn't say. The thing neither of us wanted to mention tonight.

If Luke lost the battle tomorrow, it wouldn't be just *a little while*.

I'd never see him again.

Tonight could very well be our last.

"Let's go somewhere else, then. Somewhere the angels won't expect to find us. One of those... I don't know, rent-by-the-hour places. A shitty motel. Anywhere but here." I slipped one of my hands from his grasp and stroked his cheek with my fingertips. "I don't *want* you to burn for me."

"I've been burning for you since the first time I laid eyes on you, love." Luke reclaimed my hand from his cheek and drew it to his lips. He pressed a firm kiss over my fingers. "You're safest in the Inferno tonight. One more time surely won't hurt."

I sighed. The shimmer in his pale blue eyes was honest and half-pleading and so full of love it made my chest ache.

I knew it would hurt him. No matter what he said.

But if this was really our last night together, I also knew we'd both be hurting so much more if we didn't make the most of it.

"Okay." There was no point in arguing with him. He was the most stubborn man I'd ever met in all my life. "Then let's go."

We flew through the portal together, entering Hell hand in hand.

Immediately, Luke's hand grew hotter in my own. I glanced over at him, worried, as I felt his skin begin to crumble away beneath my palm.

My breath caught in my throat in an instant. My eyes went wide with awe.

I'd expected to see the hollows of his cheeks smoldering, hot with embers. I'd expected to see his lips twisted in pain.

Instead, Luke glowed.

His skin cracked, flaking away like chips of paint. Beneath it, he was marble. A Roman statue, worthy of any museum. The light emanating from beneath the moving stone his body seemed to be made of now was gentle and beautifully white.

His lips were set into a charming, easy smile.

"You aren't burning." I wasn't about to complain about it, but it didn't make sense. Luke was an angel again now. Hell wasn't a place where he was safe.

It should have been killing him.

Instead, he looked more divine than ever.

He looked like a god.

"On the inside, I am," Luke assured me. We touched down on the roof of the Inferno together. When my feet touched the ground, he tugged on my hand, sending me stumbling against his chest and into his arms. "But on the outside... this is who I am now, love. This is my angelic form."

"It's... incredible." I moved a hand to his neck to brush my fingers against his skin. It was both pleasantly warm and strangely cool. Like running my hands under water so hot, it felt cold. His body was soft like flesh and hard like stone all at once. When my gaze met his, I felt a shiver. "I feel like I don't ever want to look away."

"Then you know how I feel when I look at you," said Luke. He tilted his head, leaning into my touch. "It would drive a human mad to look at

me when I'm like this, you know."

"Then I'm glad I'm not a human anymore." I searched his eyes and lips for pain again but didn't find any. Only Luke's comfortable smile and his celestial glow. Just like a star. "How can you be so calm, though? Doesn't it hurt to be here like this?"

"It does," Luke admitted with a small nod. "Deep down. But not as badly as you'd think. I can bear it." He took my face into his hands and drew my lips toward his, hesitating the moment before the kiss. "Hard to hurt too much when your lips are only a breath away."

He kissed me gently at first, like he was afraid that when his lips met mine, I would burn too.

But his kiss only seared in the best of ways. It stirred heat up inside me. A slow, sinking kind of warmth that started on the tip of my tongue as I smoothed it across his lower lip, then unfurled deep into my muscles as he moved his tongue against mine as well.

"I'm going to take you to bed now, darling girl." Luke's breath shuddered as the kiss broke. He ran his fingers through my hair like he was trying to put its texture to memory. "And when I get you there, I'm going to remind you exactly what kind of man you married. Exactly how loved you really are."

And he did.

He really did.

We took the elevator up to the ninth floor. By the time we stumbled out of it together, our bodies were so desperately intertwined, we were lucky that we'd done this so many times before. We stumbled slow and blind through the suite like two dancers in a clumsy waltz that only worked because we knew each other's bodies so well. Our lips didn't leave each other's. We refused to pause our kisses. Even as we tore each other's clothes off, we did it without looking.

It was like every kiss could be our last now—so we made every kiss count.

"So beautiful," Luke breathed when he finally got me onto the bed. He touched his fingertips to my temples, then ran them all the way down the length of my body. His fingers rose over the firm mounds of my breasts, making my aching nipples swell and stiffen. He dragged his fingers down my ribs, caressed my round, pregnant belly, then slipped them between my

thighs, spreading them apart to reveal my cunt. “Even after all this time, I can still hardly believe that you’re really mine.”

“Of course I’m yours.” I raised my hips up toward his mouth as he settled between my legs. The heat he’d stirred in me on the rooftop was pulsing through me even hotter now that he had me in his bed. My pussy was flushed and throbbing with need. I could smell it from here: earthy and sweet and soaking wet. “I couldn’t ever belong to anyone else.”

“And you won’t.” Luke’s eyes flashed up at me over the swell of my belly. His gaze was more intense than I’d ever seen it. “No matter what, love. You belong to me, and me alone.”

“Yes,” I breathed. I knew it was true.

But Luke had never been one to make a point without finding a way to really drive it home.

As he lowered his mouth to my cunt, I knew this one would be no different.

He kissed the valleys of my inner thighs like they were something holy. When his lips trailed down to my pussy, he kissed it in the same way he kissed my mouth. His tongue slipped into my folds, tasting and teasing.

He had me gasping for him by the time he finally reached my clit.

“Perfect cunt. So fucking beautiful.”

His breath washed over my swollen, sensitive bud with humidity as he spoke. Luke’s hands curled around my hips, pulling me closer with a rough tug.

He sucked my clit into his mouth, and I moaned, needy and high-pitched. He took it gently between his teeth and I gasped as he moved his tongue against it in slow, steady licks.

“Mm.” He moaned back at me like I was something delicious. A treat. “Fuck, your cunt is sweet.”

His fingers pressed into my lower back, massaging deep into my muscles, while he rolled my clit in tiny circles with his tongue.

The combination of the sensations created waves of pleasure that rippled through my body. One from my clit, the other from my back. Both ended up in the same place: my core. My womb. It was throbbing softly with every touch Luke gave me. Around it, something was stirring. Not the baby, which felt like it was fast asleep, but something just as significant and profound.

It was a gentle ecstasy, the slow-building kind. When I'd imagined this moment—despite my best efforts to argue with Luke about it, I knew that inevitably, I'd end up right here with him in this bed, just like this—I'd imagined it quick and frantic. A sloppy, intense act of desperation sped up to ensure that Luke only felt minimal pain.

But Luke refused to turn it into that thing. I knew he must have been hurting, but he didn't show it.

He was slow with me. He took his time.

Every movement of his lips and tongue and teeth against my clit felt intensely profound.

Every throb of pleasure he gave me felt like it meant something. Something bigger than just me and him together in bed.

It felt like a love greater than the entire universe itself.

"Come here," I beckoned him as the heat he was creating between my legs started to swell into something more urgent and intense. My breath rose and fell heavy in my chest. I raked my fingers through his hair, then tugged gently at his head to pull him up toward me. "I want you, Luke. All of you. Please."

"You're having me, love." Luke kissed my belly, then slipped back down between my legs to continue licking my cunt. "Want to enjoy you."

"You're hurting, Luke." Every time I looked back down at his blue eyes and his pale marble skin, he was glowing brighter and brighter. His tongue against my clit was inhumanly hot. As much as I loved the way he was taking his time with me, I knew that for every moment of pleasure he was giving me right now, he was paying with incredible pain as well. "I need you *now*. Before we run out of time."

"I can take it." But as Luke rested his cheek against my inner thigh for a moment, I could feel exactly how hot his skin was burning. I was certain that if I'd still been human, it would have hurt me just to be touched by him right now.

But I wasn't human anymore, and the heat from Luke's angelic skin only called out to the flush of desire I felt beneath my own.

"Luke, I need you," I pleaded with him. I did. The need panged within me, ringing through every nerve of my body and coiling in my core with a tension that begged for release. "Fuck me. Now. Please."

"Oh, Evie," Luke breathed against my thigh. His eyes met mine, hooded and full of flames. "You know I love it when you beg."

Finally, Luke placed a hand over my cunt and shifted over me. The swell of my belly kept him from folding his body over mine. It was almost a shame—I would have liked to be held tight and close. I would have liked to have my body pinned helplessly beneath his.

But as Luke took his cock in his fist, from this position I had the benefit of seeing all of him. His chest, broad and chiseled. His cock, long and hard between his thick, powerful thighs. As he stroked it over my cunt, his lips pulled back slightly, revealing a flash of incisors that looked surprisingly sharp. Behind him, his wings were folded against his back, tall and pale with glistening feathers.

His eyes were pure, pale blue flame.

His entire body was covered in a white-hot glow.

“Come here, then.” Luke took my hips in his hands again and dragged me toward him on the bed. “Need you close, you perfect, hot-cunted thing.”

My cunt did feel hot. It burned nearly as hot as Luke did. My clit was still throbbing from the ministrations of his tongue. My slit was dripping with honey and clenching around nothing—at least, until Luke finally dropped his hips down and placed his cock flush with the slickness of my folds.

I waited for a thrust—one of those hard, rough ones that would leave me gasping and twisting the sheets beneath me in my fists—but instead, Luke only pressed his tip firmly against my entrance.

My pussy throbbed harder. It wanted to be fucked. It wanted to be *full*.

And as it clenched in desperation, Luke didn’t end up having to thrust inside me.

Eagerly, my pussy sucked the tip of him in.

“Fuck,” Luke breathed, pressing his hips down and leaning into the sensation. His cock slid into me with perfection, stretching me just enough to fit its thickness. “You’re so fucking tight, love...”

“More,” I begged. “I need all of you. Give it to me. Please.”

Luke curled a hand around the back of my head, cradling it and using it for leverage at the same time. He moved over me with focused care. His hips shifted against my thighs. They pumped into me slowly at first, but there was a palpable momentum between our bodies now.

As Luke fed my cunt inch after inch of his hard, thick shaft, drawing back only so he could delve in deeper with his next thrust, we were coming

together quicker with every passing moment. Having Luke inside me felt incredibly urgent. Like a mutual hunger that would kill us both if it wasn't satisfied.

Soon, neither of us would be able to maintain control of this at all anymore.

I saw the exact moment that Luke realized it. Finally, as he buried the final inches of his cock into my cunt, the understanding that he was about to lose control flashed across his eyes.

In an instant, we were rolling together. His wings folded away as he placed himself on his back and lifted me up on top of him.

"Ride me," he commanded in a growl. "My Evie. My Lilith. Claim my cock like the goddess you are. Just like you did the first time we made love."

My hips were already moving, answering his order before he was even finished giving it. Deep, sharp, primal pleasure surged through me every time my hips met his. Beneath me, his hips were working too.

We moved together in exquisite harmony. Two bodies, desperate for each other and desperately in love, coming together as one.

And *god*—when we came *together*, in a rapidly building orgasm that unleashed between us at the same time, it was a rapture. I cried out as the orgasm hit, clinging to Luke's shoulders for dear life. Luke grunted and growled back, arching beneath me and bucking his hips so hard that they lifted both of us up off the mattress. The heat and light he was giving off was blinding.

So blinding that I could see it, wild explosions of pleasure and agony alike, even when I closed my eyes.

I knew the moment when the orgasm hit. What I didn't know was when it ended. It felt like it lasted an eternity. Every time I thought it would fade, it only rose up again in a whole new intensity, completely unlike anything else I'd ever felt.

I lost myself in it.

I lost myself in him.

"Love?"

I opened my eyes slowly to the sound of Luke's voice. I didn't know how much time had passed, or whether I'd even been conscious for all of it.

I only knew that I was warm and tired and wrapped in his arms.

We were lying together on our sides now, though I didn't entirely recall how we'd gotten there. My body was slick with sweat. Luke's cock was still inside me.

"Love." Luke's fingers stroked my cheek with concern. "Are you all right?"

"I'm all right." I nodded and cuddled deeper into his embrace. There wasn't a single bead of sweat on him. When his skin came into contact with the beads of it on my own body, in an instant it turned to steam. "Are you?"

"I'll manage." The pain was more clearly written on his face now. Still, impossibly, he was remaining stoic through all of this. I had no idea how. "It hurts, but I don't want to leave you. Not quite yet."

"You have to," I whispered. I knew it was true. But I clung to him just the same. "I don't want you to hurt."

"You're worth it." He pressed his lips to my forehead and squeezed me tight to his chest. "And there are a few more things I still have left to do before I go."

Luke unwound his body from mine slowly. His shoulders were tense as he moved across the room to the place where we'd abandoned his pants in the tender striptease we'd done for each other on the way to bed.

When he returned, he had his dagger in his hand.

"What's that for?" I asked. My eyelids were heavy, and my mind felt hazy, but my body felt more awake than it had ever been.

"I want to cut your hair, love," Luke said as he sat back down on the bed. "You've never liked it so long, and I like it any way you do. It's silly, after all of this loss we've been through, to keep anything you don't love."

I bit my lip. My hair had been impossibly long and heavy for almost my entire life. First, I'd kept it that way because I'd liked it. Then, I'd kept it long for Adam.

But Luke was right. I didn't love it anymore.

I shifted myself up into a sitting position and gathered my hair up in my fists. "Okay. Cut it, then."

I bowed my head, and in a single, quick motion of his dagger, Luke severed my waves on the edge of his blade.

When it was done, we both breathed a sigh of relief. It felt like a huge weight had been removed from my shoulders. A glance at the thick length of hair that Luke now held in his fist told me that one really had been.

It wasn't anything compared to the weight of what I knew would happen when he met with Michael tomorrow morning.

But it was something. In an ocean of guilt and heartbreak, it was a tiny reprieve.

"Will you keep a lock of it with you tomorrow?" I asked.

Luke nodded and placed the rope of my hair aside. "I will. Of course I will."

"I'll hold you to that," I warned him.

He smiled. "Good. Then let me hold you as well."

He moved behind me on the bed, pressing his chest to my back and pulling my body as close to his as two bodies could be. His hands roamed over my belly for a moment, then his fingers twined into the spaces between mine.

"If I fail tomorrow," he whispered into my ear. "If Hell should fall—"

"We can't let that happen, Luke." It was a possibility too horrible to even imagine right now.

If it became reality, I didn't know that it would be one I could face.

"I know. But if does." He raised my hand up in front of my face. The ring he'd placed on my finger—the one that marked me as his wife—glimmered in his glow. "I want you to touch this ring, and I want you to think of home. You need to be in Pandemonium to stay as safe as possible during the battle. But if Hell becomes Heavenly ground, you'll burn. I can't let that happen."

"You're my home." It sounded stupid, but I couldn't help it. It was true.

"Think of Vermont. Go to your parents," Luke said sternly. "Promise me, Evie. If Hell falls, the second most dangerous place for you to be is at my side."

"Okay." My voice was tired and small. It broke my heart to agree with him, but I knew Luke. I trusted him more than I trusted anyone I'd ever known.

If this was what he needed me to do, then it wasn't even a matter of honoring my vow to obey him anymore.

In the roots of my teeth and the marrow of my bones, I knew that everything he told me now as he continued to endure the pain of existing here in Hell was urgent and essential.

Everything Luke did and said was meant to keep me and our baby safe.

“Thank you, Evie.” Luke’s lips seared against my neck as he brushed them over my skin. “Now. Promise me one last thing?”

“Of course,” I said. “Anything.”

“If I die tomorrow—and I might.” The worst-case scenario. The very thing we’d thought impossible, suddenly so real with possibility that it made me want to cry. “If Hell falls. I need you to be strong through it.”

He folded my hand over my belly, then placed his on top of it.

“I don’t know how I’d be able to be,” I admitted. “But I’ll try.”

“You’ll have to do more than try, love. You’ll have to succeed.” Beneath our hands, the baby gave a little kick of encouragement. “This child is our legacy. Something new and wonderful and perfect. Be strong for me. Be strong for our baby. Raise him to be good and loving and kind, and if he asks about me...” Luke gave a ragged laugh. “Tell him I was good and kind too. Even if it’s a lie.”

“How could it be a lie, Luke?” I brought his hand up to my lips so I could kiss it. His skin was beginning to fracture now. The light inside him was leaking out in bursts now. “You are good. You are kind. You’ve loved me for as long as I’ve known life. You’re the best man I’ve ever met. Your love is the greatest thing I’ve ever known.”

“Good,” Luke said. “Then tell him that.”

“You’re still so sure that the baby is going to be a boy?” I asked. I wished I could see Luke’s face, but my body was too exhausted to roll over.

Maybe it was for the best. I could hear the pain in his voice now. It was becoming too much for even Luke to bear.

“I am,” Luke said. He sounded like the belief was something beyond even the darkest shadows of doubt.

“I promise, then,” I told him. “I’ll be strong like you’ve been strong for me. I’ll raise our son, just like you’ve said—and I’ll tell him every story about you that I know.”

Every story I knew of Luke was a good one. For our entire love, Luke *had* been good. He *had* been loving and kind.

Even though he was the Devil, not a single thing I told our child about him would ever have to be a lie.

“Do you love me, Evie?” I knew he had to leave soon, but the fact that he’d waited to ask me this time was the greatest blessing I could have imagined.

“I do, Luke.” I nodded and closed my eyes, trying to memorize the way his body felt against mine. “I love you deeper than the oceans and more than there are stars in the sky.”

Luke pressed his cheek to mine from behind and wrapped me up as tight as our bodies would allow.

“Yes,” he whispered back to me. “Good. That’s exactly how I love you. Exactly like this. Exactly like that.”

EVIE

When I woke up the next morning, he was gone. Just like I'd known he would be.

He'd waited until I fell asleep to do it, which was kind of him.

He'd taken the length of my hair with him. I touched my fingers to my mouth, feeling a kiss I'd been asleep for still burning there on my lips.

A kiss goodbye.

I wanted to cry, but I knew I wasn't able to. We'd been pulled apart too many times. We'd fought our way back together over and over again, only to be separated once more.

Too many times, I'd accepted the reality that I was never going to see my husband again.

There weren't any tears left to cry now. Only an empty feeling in their place. I was a glass that had been tipped over so many times, it had finally been shattered.

Maybe when Luke met with Michael today, he'd win. He'd come back to me and we could pick up the pieces once more. The same way we always did.

Or maybe, he'd lose.

Maybe this really would be the end.

I rolled over and hugged the pillow that had once been his. It was where he'd laid his head on that first morning when I'd woken up here in

the Inferno, back when I'd had no idea who the hell Luke Dawnstar, CEO of Adversary Industries, even was.

I hadn't even known who *I* was back then.

Thanks to Luke, I did now. Even better, I'd become something so much more than the person I'd been before he'd entered my life. I'd been so stupid when we first met. Just a silly girl willingly giving up her life to be with a man who'd never loved her. A naive idiot clutching at her pearls over the idea of marrying a different man—a better one—after only knowing him for a single night.

If I could have gone back to that moment, I would have agreed to breakfast and let Luke give me a good, hard fucking while we waited for it to arrive.

Hindsight was twenty-twenty, I guessed.

I'd never get that morning back. All I could do was hope for more mornings in the days to come.

Maybe if Luke won this battle today, we could finally stop feeling like we were living on borrowed time.

I took a shower. The warm water over my aching breasts and heavy belly felt good, but I was only under it for a few minutes before the heat and the steam started to get to my head.

As I climbed back out and wrapped myself in a towel, I felt dizzy and a little sick. Whether it was from stress, or pregnancy, or both, it was hard to say.

With my husband about to battle with angels on my behalf and a baby on the way, I probably had every right to feel sick.

By the time I'd gotten clothes on—a soft blue dress and some comfortable shoes—I heard the knock on the door of the bedroom. Behind it was Charon, offering me his arm and a sad smile.

"Time to go?" I guessed. Deeper in Hell, the safety of Pandemonium awaited me.

But it would only be safe for as long as Hell's armies held.

"Time to go," Charon agreed. "Your friends are already there, waiting for you."

It was a small relief. Bea, Joan and Ava had always been there for me before. Through every difficulty and heartache any of us had ever faced, we'd always been there for each other.

Today would be no different. We'd get through this battle together. For their safety as well as mine.

With a nod of resignation, I took his arm and let him help me toward the door.

"EVES!" Ava rushed to me as soon as I stepped foot into my bedroom in Pandemonium. Joan and Bea weren't far behind. "Oh my god, you cut your hair!"

"Luke cut it for me," I explained as they all wrapped me up in a hug. "He's always known I never liked it long. It felt like it was finally time to chop it off."

For a long moment, none of us said anything. They hugged me in a big dogpile, and I hugged them right back.

"Arrf!" The Beast yipped, racing out from beneath the bed and nipping at each of our heels until finally, Joan bent down to pick him up.

"Little hoodlum." She scowled fondly at him as she folded his furry body into the hug as well. "He doesn't like being left out."

"I'm sorry, buddy." I bent down to give him a kiss on the forehead. "You must've felt like we abandoned you."

For the seven beautiful months Luke and I had spent together in the Bellagio, I supposed we kind of had.

"Couldn't exactly keep a puppy that's still learning when and where he can tinkle in your luxury suite," Bea pointed out. "Besides, we've been keeping him company while Charon taught him to stop eating shoes. This little guy's company made my wedding planning far more pleasant."

"And finishing my thesis," Ava added.

"And mine," said Joan.

"Congrats, by the way," I said with a smile, and meant it. My own degree had been left on the backburner after Raph's... death? Disappearance? I still wasn't entirely sure. Given our last meeting, I didn't know that I cared, either. But the fact that the girls had been able to finish up their own degrees was a relief.

It meant that I hadn't entirely fucked their lives up by being in them. At least, not as much as I could have.

"Oh, hon. I'm sorry you weren't able to... well, you know." Bea wrapped me up especially tight. "It's not fair."

“It’s life,” I said with a shrug. “I don’t know that I would have been able to finish my thesis through the pregnancy fatigue anyway, you know. For the last seven months, pretty much all I’ve wanted to do is eat, sleep and—”

“Have your brains fucked out?” Joan supplied.

“Yeah,” I said with a laugh. “Something like that. Pregnancy horniness has been a thing, too.”

Not today, though.

Today, my sexuality was completely silent. I only felt off-kilter. Full of anxiety and raw nerves.

“Eves,” Ava whispered, gesturing downward with her gaze. “I think the baby might be... *kicking*.”

“It does that a lot,” I admitted. We were still all so tangled up in our hug, I supposed Ava must have been close to just the right part of my belly at the right time. “Ten kicks or more an hour ever since a couple months ago. Sometimes, I can feel her get hiccups, too.”

“Her?” Bea arched an eyebrow, smiling with delight. “I thought you two were trying not to find out until the birth.”

“Luke still seems so certain that it’s going to be a boy.” His prophecy had told him so, after all. “But sometimes... yeah. I can imagine that she’s a girl, at least. That’s probably crazy, though. Can anyone really tell?”

“My mom knew I was going to be a girl,” said Ava. “Seventh daughter of a seventh daughter. She always joked it meant I’d have the Sight, but...”

Ava sighed. We all joined her in it.

Everything that we knew would be happening up on Earth right now had gone unspoken between us so far. As we separated from the hug and the girls headed to the bed with The Beast, I knew that they must have been hurting too.

They cared about Don, Lock and Mal too. They might not have been married to Luke’s demon friends, but I knew there were feelings there. Even for Joan—I still hadn’t heard from Lock about whether or not he’d ever managed to actually ask her on a proper date yet—there was still a close friendship on the line today. Maybe more.

“I’m sorry,” I told them all. “I know that you all must be hurting.”

“Eves...” Ava said gently.

“You have more at stake today than anyone,” Bea pointed out. “You don’t need to apologize. None of this is your fault. You do realize that, right?”

“I do. But I still feel guilty.” It was a hard feeling to shake. “I’ve dragged you all into this with me. I didn’t mean to, but I know you’ve had to deal with a lot of weird shit ever since Luke and I found each other again.”

“Yeah, and it’s been a blast.” Joan gave me a reassuring grin. “I’ve gotten to fight minotaurs because of you! I’ve fucked fallen angels!”

“Have you really?” Bea asked, then laughed. “Never mind. Of course you have. I don’t know why I’m surprised.”

“I never would have gotten to know Mal without you,” Ava added. “I would have just kept... I don’t know, blushing every time he walked into a room.”

“And I met Don.” Bea sounded the saddest of the three. It made sense. Even if Don made it through the battle today healthy and well, Bea was engaged to marry someone else. It was something that I didn’t think I’d ever understand, but Bea was from a totally different world than the rest of us. Her family had enough money, the rules she had to live by were as strange to me as any in Heaven or Hell. “I’m glad for it, Eves. Without you, our lives would have certainly been boring over the last year.”

“Aarrf!” The Beast yipped, doing hot laps around the mattress.

“Do you want to come sit with us while we wait to see what happens?” Ava patted a space on the bed next to her, but I shook my head.

“I think I might need to walk around for a little bit.” I placed my hands over my stomach, feeling even more unsettled than ever now. “The baby’s doing a tap dance on my insides right now. I’m going to take a stroll out in the gardens and see if it won’t calm down.”

“Come back soon then,” Joan said. “You shouldn’t have to spend today alone. We’re here for you.”

“If we weren’t here for you on the day that Heaven and Hell do battle for the fate of you and your little family, what kind of friends would we be?” Bea gave me a smile in parting.

I gave her one back, then headed out for the balcony and down to the gardens below.

As I neared a bush of eglantine roses—Luke’s favorites, and mine now too—the kicking in my belly got even more intense. At least it wasn’t

being focused on my bladder this time—that hadn't been fun. But it felt like the baby was trying to tell me something. Banging it out in Morse code against my womb.

"Shh. It's all right," I said, rubbing my hands over its furious little feet. "Everything's going to be okay. Your daddy is going to make sure of it."

I hoped that it wasn't a lie. The baby seemed to believe it, though. Slowly, the kicks subsided. My lower back ached for a moment, then I felt the baby turn. It dropped suddenly, shifting into a lower position where it seemed to be more comfortable.

That was a relief, at least. Maybe if the baby was calm, I could be too. Maybe it knew something that I didn't yet.

I wandered a little further into the thickets of Pandemonium's gardens. They were wild and winding, but I assumed they'd been planned that way.

They were beautiful. All the flowers and leaves actually reminded me of Eden in that memory that Luke had shown me.

If everything turned out okay and we could find a way to make Luke Infernal again, maybe this could be our own little Eden. We could play with the baby in it together. *Hand in hand with wandering steps and slow*, just like Milton had written.

It was a nice thought, at least.

I'd cling to it, just like I was clinging to hope.

"Your Highness?"

The voice that called out to me was familiar, but one that I hadn't heard in a long while.

I peered around a thicket of thorns and found the face that matched the voice staring back at me in wonder.

It was a face I hadn't seen for a while, either.

"Phlegyas?" I blinked, stunned, as he grabbed my hand and clutched it in his. "Where have you been?"

"I've been away, Your Highness." He dropped to his knees and held my hand tight. "And ever since I found my way back here... I haven't had the courage to show my face."

"Why not?" It wasn't as if Phlegyas had ever been cruel to me. If anything, he'd been fatherly and kind. An ear to listen to my worries and a voice that gave me encouragement when I needed it most. "Where did you go?"

“I...” Phlegyas bowed his head low and cleared his throat. “No questions, please. I need to confess something to you. But to answer what you’ve asked me, I need to tell it all in the order that it makes the most sense.”

And then he did. All of it. He told me again of his daughter, who was up in Heaven without him. He told me about how he’d appealed to the angels for mercy. How they’d given him a few tasks—tasks that he’d thought would be simple to complete in exchange for entrance through the pearly gates.

“But then I met you, Evie. And you were so kind to me—so sweet and so good-hearted—that it tainted every action I took from that moment on,” Phlegyas said mournfully. “I took your memories on the morning after your wedding while you slept. I reported to the angels your comings and goings from Hell. I told them how you’d tried to leave, and how Luke had ordered you not to go. All of this—” He gestured above us, where I knew a battle must have already broken out. “It’s all my fault.”

I blinked at him, trying to process. My brain felt strangely fuzzy all of a sudden, so it took me a moment or two longer than I would have liked.

“That’s...” I shook my head and placed my hands around my belly. It felt heavy in a different way now. It had, I supposed, ever since the baby had shifted. Strange—but everything about pregnancy was. “I... I don’t know what to say, Phlegyas. Did you at least get to meet your daughter again?”

And if so, why was he here?

Surely, he hadn’t come all the way back to Hell to make an apology.

“I was tricked,” Phlegyas said, shaking his head. “Just when I thought Michael had finally taken me to Heaven... he dropped me instead. I plummeted back down to Earth. I wandered the Abyss for a while. And then, when I heard that you were coming to Hell again while Luke battled the angels... I’m so sorry, your Highness. I shouldn’t have done what I did. I regret it every day.”

“It’s... okay,” I said after a long moment.

“Is it?” Phlegyas looked up at me, eyes full of tentative relief.

It wasn’t, but he seemed sincere. There was no turning back time now, and my body felt like it was churning. I felt strange. I felt sick. The dizziness I’d experienced this morning in the shower had returned, and my brain was full of static. Too much to get angry though.

I tried to imagine being separated from my own baby. It wasn't even born yet, but if the angels got their way—if they took the life that Luke and I had created together to Heaven like they planned, separating us forever—I might do terrible things to try to fix it, too.

I didn't appreciate his betrayal, but it was in the past now.

I understood. And that meant I could forgive, too.

"I can't believe the angels had you do all that for nothing. I'm sorry you didn't get what you wanted either."

"It was my own fault," Phlegyas whispered. "I've always liked you, Your Majesty. Ever since I met you. And when you spoke to me in the elevator that day about becoming a mother... do you remember?"

"Yes," I said. "A little. You told me about your daughter, too."

"I felt for you in that moment more than ever. I knew that Lucifer would be parted from you again because of my actions. I wanted to give you something to remember your husband by. I wanted you to know the joy of having a child, too." He nodded at my arm. "Your birth control implant. I touched your arm to remove it."

"You... you took my birth control out of... my arm?" I furrowed my brow. Things weren't just fuzzy in my brain anymore. They were fuzzy in my vision, too. Phlegyas' face blurred strangely. Buzzing filled my ears, almost in the way it did when Beelzebub entered a room—but different, too.

Definitely different.

Something was happening.

It wasn't until I felt a gentle snap inside me that I realized what that something was.

Warmth and wetness flowed down my thighs from between my legs. I felt so faint as it trickled down to my ankles, I dropped to my knees there with Phlegyas in the dirt.

"Your Majesty?" He lifted a hand to my face, brushing my hair away from my cheek. His palm felt hot and cold all at once. As he moved his fingers across my cheek, I realized I was covered in sweat. "Are you all right?"

"I don't know," I whispered. My eyes were wide, but I couldn't make my vision go clear. There was a pressure low in my belly. In my head, the buzzing only got louder. "I think..."

I think I'm going into labor, I wanted to say, but my lips wouldn't form the words.

It was two months early. Far too soon for this.

But my water had just broken. When I closed my eyes, I could see a golden glow all around my belly, shimmering and bright.

Instinctively, I brushed my fingertips against the ring Luke had given me. I needed something to ground myself on in that moment, and the black diamond of my ring was pleasantly rough and cool.

If anything happens, touch the ring and think of home.

Instead, a thought of Luke flashed across my mind before I could stop it.

I needed him. I tried to fight the thought back, but I couldn't.

This baby was coming. *Now*. And thinking of Luke—it was the only thing that I wanted. It was the only thing that felt right.

In an instant, a strong wind picked up around me. I drew in a breath—

And I found myself somewhere else.

Not somewhere in a memory. Not this time.

This time, I found him.

LUKE

It played out in the exact way I suspected it would.

“Have you made your decision?” Michael stood before the Inferno with his army assembled behind him. All the cherubim with their lion’s talons and eagle’s wings. All the seraphim, beautiful and deadly and armed with swords.

All the angels of Heaven waited for his word. Either to stand down, or to attack.

“I have,” I told Michael, all of Hell’s armies at my back as well. The Fallen had assembled. For once, this wasn’t a fight they could run from. With them were our demons, our minotaurs, and giants and hellhounds. Only Legion and The Beast were absent from our ranks. The former was still protecting Evie’s parents in Vermont. The latter was in Pandemonium, protecting Evie herself.

“Say it then,” Michael commanded.

Even before the word left my lips, I could tell he knew I was going to say no.

The battle began as soon as my answer rang out. Our forces clashed together like waves of competing oceans.

Neither army had any intention of giving in. Heaven had too much to gain today to consider anything but victory.

Hell had too much to lose—and I had the most on the line of all.

Angels flooded in around Michael as soon as I drew my dagger and Evie's flaming sword. They prevented me from battling him one-on-one and suffered dearly for it.

It would have been all too easy to dismiss Michael's refusal to engage me as one of cowardice. I wanted to roar it at him: *coward! Come and fight me yourself!*

But I knew that like always, Michael's choices were carefully calculated.

He and I would burn ourselves out doing battle against each other. We were evenly matched. Neither of us would ever win.

He didn't want this to end with a draw between us, though. I could tell.

He wanted me weakened enough by his minions that by the time I finally fought my way to him, he wouldn't just win.

He'd kill me as well.

I fought anyway. What choice did I have? Every opponent I sank my sword into was one less that the others would have to deal with.

Every moment I fought my way forward, my fury at Michael grew.

We both thought that we were fighting for the good of our shared universe. But I had one thing in this battle that Michael didn't.

Or, technically, I supposed, I had two.

I had Evie, the love of my life. My first. My only. I'd lost her so many times, the rage in my chest at the thought of losing her again gave me a strength and a bloodthirst that wouldn't be denied.

If I lost this battle, I'd lose her forever this time.

It wasn't just Evie I was fighting for now, though.

It was the life of our unborn child on the line too.

I cut down the last opponent standing between Michael and me with fire in my eyes to match the flames of the sword in my hand.

"Ah, adversary. I knew you'd find me." Michael readied his spear as I approached. There was smirk on his lips I was going to relish making him regret. "Couldn't help yourself, could you?"

"You know I've never been good at denying myself the things I want. As for helping myself, though..." I smirked back at him with angelic blood glistening across my face. "I've always been of the opinion that helping myself is one of my many strengths."

I wanted to make him hurt. For all times he'd taken Evie away from me, I wanted to do more than just hurt him, even.

Michael wanted to kill me today.

I wanted to kill him as well.

“You’re weakened, you know.” We moved in a slow circle, locked in each other’s orbits, while the battle raged all around. “You won’t be able to win.”

“Can’t afford to lose,” I countered. My fists tightened around my weapons. Dagger in one hand, sword in the other. I’d wrapped the entire length of Evie’s hair around the hilt of the sword. To my amazement, it had turned to gold as soon as I was done. Now, it served as my grip. Beneath my palm, it reminded me of what I fought for.

It reminded me of the love of my wife.

I’d fight with sword and dagger both in this duel; the sword for beating Michael’s spear aside, the dagger for sinking between his ribs once an opening was made.

He lunged for me first. Our weapons clashed. When I jabbed at him with my dagger, he spun away. I spun as well, bringing my sword around to meet with his spear again—

And just like that, it was on.

We fought like dancers. After millennia of fighting against each other, he knew all of my moves, and I knew all of his.

My muscles burned with fatigue, but I ignored them. This body had served me well so far. I knew it wouldn’t fail me now.

Every time he cut me—across the chest once, then across the cheek with the tip of his spear—my hatred for him only grew.

Every time I cut him in return—a quick slash across his knuckles, a piercing of my dagger in his shoulder—my resolve grew, too.

But as our fight ached on, it was quickly becoming apparent that Michael had been correct to hang back while I burned myself out on his underlings.

My anger could fuel me for a while. So could desperation.

So could love.

But not forever.

As Michael’s spear crashed hard against my sword and sent it spiraling out of my hand, that realization hurt almost as much as the knowledge that it was all ending now.

Almost. But not quite.

I'd failed my kingdom. Hell would fall to Heaven today. Michael would claim the entire realm of his own.

I'd failed my friends. Don, Mal, Lock—they'd all die here today. The angels wouldn't allow them to live. There was a chance that they were already dead.

I'd failed Evie's friends. I didn't know what the angels would do to Bea, Joan and Ava when they found the three women sheltering in Pandemonium. I hoped they'd show mercy. But if they didn't... it would be my fault too.

Worst of all, I'd failed my family. I'd left Evie a way to quickly escape Hell if Heaven's forces claimed it for their own, but I knew she'd be hunted until they claimed her too.

I'd failed my wife. I'd failed my child, still innocent and helpless inside Evie's womb.

"If it brings you any consolation, adversary, you were never going to win." There was no smile on Michael's lips as he kicked my sword aside and approached me. The tip of his spear was leveled directly at my heart. "This is the way it has to be, and you know it. Those scrolls foretold this moment as well."

"You don't have to do this." I blinked as he mentioned the scrolls again. He thought he had to do this. He thought he was making a choice between me and my family, and the entirety of Earth. "You know Hell received those prophecies too, Michael. I've read them more times than I can count. They never mentioned anything about a battle between you and me."

He didn't know it, but he'd just confirmed a suspicion for me.

It had all been a trick. By who, I still didn't know.

But the scrolls that had been to Heaven and those that had shown up in Hell weren't the same.

"How typical of you, adversary." Michael's lips curled with disgust. "Even with your last breaths, you waste them on more lies."

He lunged for me with the spear, and I pulled myself out of the way. The spear entered my shoulder instead of my heart—just as deadly in its own way. Pain ripped through my muscles like wildfire as he pulled it back out.

It wouldn't kill me outright, but every wound he gave me now would bring me closer to the one that would end my life.

The next time the spear entered me, it took me in the knee. My kneecap shattered as Michael drove the metal through it. More loss. More pain.

What would Evie think if she could see me now, so injured and weak?

I knew she wouldn't be able to bring herself to hate me. But I wished for it anyway.

She deserved to hate me. I'd failed her. I'd failed her and our child both.

My leg gave out as Michael removed the spear again. My body dropped down onto it, forcing me to kneel to him.

"I'm sorry, Lucifer." Michael leveled the spear at my heart again. There was no joy in his eyes. He was simply doing what he thought needed to be done. "If there was any other way—"

"There *is*." The revelation that the prophecies we'd based this endless war on were full of half-truths and outright falsehoods may have come far too late, but if he would just listen to me—just give me a moment to explain—

"No more tricks, Lucifer." Michael shook his head and drew back his spear for momentum. "It's done."

I closed my eyes and bowed my head.

Not because I was ready to accept this. I had no choice in the matter, but still. I didn't want to die.

It was only, in my final moment, I didn't want Michael's face to be the last thing I saw.

In the darkness behind my eyelids, I drew Evie's face into my mind. Her golden hair. Her heart-shaped jawline. Her luscious dark pink lips and her exquisite dove-gray eyes.

The last thing I saw would be her.

My body was braced for impact. I readied myself for agony of the spear piercing my chest. I knew it would hurt, and when that pain finally slipped away, I knew all would be lost.

But as a gust of hot air whipped around me, the scent of ash and roses along with it, I felt the spear enter my chest—but I didn't feel the life-ending pain that should have come along with it.

The point of the spear was buried in my skin, yes, but not in my heart.

I was alive.

But why?

I opened my eyes to waves of golden locks curtaining around me. Soft, full pink lips were parted in surprise, positioned right over my own.

I saw dove-gray eyes, full of fear and pain.

I saw the face of my wife. My Evie. My everything.

And lower, I saw Michael's spear sticking out through the center of her chest, leaking blood.

Not the black blood of infernals, though.

Not the pearly white blood of angels, either.

Evie's blood was golden. As golden as her hair.

As golden as the glow of the Almighty's love.

"Evie," I gasped, reaching for her. "Evie—love—"

To hold her, I had to drive Michael's spear deeper into my own chest so I could close the space between my body and hers, but it didn't matter. I shoved myself forward until the spear had passed through me as well. It hurt and I bore the pain.

All that mattered right now was having her in my arms.

"Luke." Her forehead rested against mine. Her eyes shimmered with tears. "Luke, I'm so sorry—I didn't mean to—I don't even know how I did it, but—"

"It's all right, love." I smoothed her hair down against the back of her head and squeezed her body tight against mine. "It's going to be all right."

"How?" Her lips trembled. Tears rolled down her face as she touched at the wound in her torso, then the wound in mine. "I've killed us. I've killed us both."

"No, darling girl." I ran my fingers up the short length of spear between us now, gathering her blood. When I held my hand up so she could see it, I did it with faith. With hope. "Look at your blood. Look at the color."

"Gold?" Evie shook her head, unable to make sense of it. "What? Why would..."

"You aren't Infernal anymore, Evie. I don't know how," I took a ragged breath and shoved my pain away. "But you're not."

"It doesn't hurt, Luke." Evie reached up to place her palm against mine. "I thought maybe it meant that I was already dead, but... but it doesn't hurt at all."

Behind us, Michael tugged his spear from our bodies. As the point passed through my chest again, I winced in preparation for more pain, but

it didn't come.

I looked down my own wound and had to blink, just to make sure I was seeing it right.

My chest was covered in golden blood as well.

Before we could make sense of it, a brilliant light exploded between us. It surrounded us, blindingly bright. We both had to clench our eyes shut until it faded slightly.

When I opened my eyes again, we were surrounded by a warm, loving, golden glow.

"The Almighty." I raised my eyes to the sky and found that the light reached all the way up into the clouds above us. "He's... protecting us, I think. I don't know why."

"I don't know either, Luke. But... I think, maybe..." Evie touched her wound again. Already, right before our eyes, it was healing.

So was mine.

"Tell me, love." My voice was eager. Something was happening. Something big. Big enough that, behind Evie, even Michael had been silenced by it. "What do you think?"

Evie closed her eyes and moved her hands to her belly. "That light is in here, too. Stronger, even. Brighter."

"Our child." *Our son.* "Either the Almighty is smiling down on us because He wants this baby to be born..."

"Or the baby has a stronger connection to him than we thought." Evie stared at me for a moment, panting. Then, her fingers curled against her belly as she winced. Suddenly, her body was stiff with pain.

"Love. What's wrong?" The light was still all around us. Our wounds were little more than soft pink scars. But nonetheless, Evie was obviously in pain still. "Are you hurt somewhere else?"

I looked up over Evie's shoulder, toward Michael. His face was pale with shock. His spear clattered to the ground at his feet.

"What's happening, Lucifer?" His voice was almost pleading.

I wished I knew.

"I'm going into labor, Luke. My water broke back in Pandemonium. I panicked, and I thought of you..." She paused, clenching her eyes shut again as her chest rose and fell rapidly with breath. "And then I was here."

Impossible. "The baby isn't due for nearly two months, though."

“I know.” Evie pursed her lips and bowed her head. “But it’s coming now.”

“We need to get you to a hospital.” I would have rather taken her to Pandemonium, but that was too great of a risk.

She wasn’t Infernal anymore. Of that much, I was certain.

There was no telling whether Hell would welcome her in willingly or leave her burning for setting foot within it. The hospital was our next best choice.

But as I gathered Evie up in my arms, Michael stepped forward.

“I don’t know what’s going on, but I can’t let you leave here. Especially not if the child is on the way.” There was fear in Michael’s eyes still, but his jaw was set firm.

“Look around you, Michael.” I let my gaze wander to the battlefield here in the streets of Las Vegas. Between the tourists, who still wandered through the bodies and blood completely oblivious to what had happened here, the remaining combatants had all stopped fighting.

They were surrounded by the golden light as well.

“It can’t be,” Michael breathed, following my gaze. “This doesn’t make any sense.”

“Tell me one thing, Michael. Those scrolls you were given. The ones that you’ve been reading your prophecies from. Do you know who sent them?”

“No.” Michael gestured vaguely to the light. “But I assumed...”

“So did I,” I admitted. “But in mine, there was no talk of destruction when my son was born. Only change. I’m not lying. Search your heart, and I think you know that what I’m saying is the truth.”

Michael sighed and bowed his head. “Yes. But mine—the end of days was predicted in them. The prophecy couldn’t have been clearer about that.”

“Then we received different prophecies. And we don’t know who sent them.” I met his gaze. “But the love of the Almighty is around us now. Something healed our wounds. Something is protecting us. The scrolls might have been a trick—a horrible joke on us both—but this can’t be faked.”

“No,” Michael agreed. His shoulders slumped in defeat. “I suppose it can’t.”

“Luke,” Evie pleaded with me. Her voice was full of urgency as her fingers dragged against my chest. “Please...”

“We need to go, Michael. She’s having this baby whether you want her to or not.”

“And I’ll let you,” Michael conceded. “But first, I’m going to need something in return.”

“Is this really a time to be making demands, asshole?” Evie snarled at him furiously as another contraction hit.

“We don’t know which set of prophecies is true,” Michael said quickly, holding up a hand. “Until we know, we need to keep Heaven and Hell as separate from Earth as possible. The balance is already upset enough as is.”

“You’re not taking the baby,” I told him firmly. “My answer hasn’t changed.”

“No,” he agreed. “You and Evelyn can live here on Earth. Raise the child together—raise it to be loving and caring and good. I’ve seen how much you love each other. I know you’re capable of it.”

“Then what the *fuck* do you want?” Evie was fierce in her urgency to leave this place, and I could hardly blame her.

“The other humans bound up in this. Your friends, Evelyn. Beatrice and Ava and Joan. They’ve been cavorting around with demons, and it has to stop. They need to return to their lives here on Earth with no remaining connections to Hell.” Michael sought out my eyes. “They need to be made to forget, so the balance can be restored. Any little bit right now helps—and their bonds to Hell are hardly small ones anymore.”

“That’s not for us to decide,” Evie panted. “I’m not bargaining away the lives of my friends just because you want—”

“We’ll talk to them,” Lock called out from behind us. I turned to see his face, bloodied and stoic. But his eyes were tinged with loss. “Ye go on now, Dawnstar. Take yer woman and get yer bairn into the world safe.”

“If it’s our ties to Evie’s friends that are at stake, then we’ll set them right ourselves,” Mal agreed. “Don’t reckon anything else would be right.”

“This isn’t your battle to fight,” said Don. “So don’t. We’ll deal with this. We’ll come find you when it’s done.”

I looked down at Evie. Through her pain, she looked nearly ready to cry.

“I won’t get to say goodbye.” She choked the words out, then buried her face in my chest.

“I know, love.” It wasn’t fair. It wasn’t right. But it had to be done. “But they’re going to understand, and we need to get you away from here now.”

“Okay.” Evie nodded. “Okay. Take me, then.”

Michael stepped back, appeased.

He gave me a nod of approval.

Then, take her I did.

My wings unfurled at my back. They flapped twice, then I pushed off of the pavement and took to the skies, the gold light still surrounding us, and Evie held safely in my arms.

LUKE

“Hold on, love,” I breathed down to Evie as I flew her over Las Vegas in the direction of the nearest hospital. “I’m going to get you there as quick as I can.”

“You’d better,” she panted, clinging to my neck. “I really don’t want to have this baby in mid-air, Luke.”

“You won’t,” I promised. I pushed my wings harder, picking up as much speed as I could. “I promise. I’m going to get you there with plenty of time.”

“I don’t know that this baby is concerned with time.” Evie gritted her teeth and grunted with pain as another contraction hit. “It’s so... so *impatient*. I can feel it. It wants to be in the world, and it wants it *now*.” Evie scowled. “I wish I knew why.”

“Yes, he’s given us a great many things to wonder about today, hasn’t he?” I was still certain that our baby would be a boy. The prophecy had certainly been clear on that much, at least. But the rest—whether Hell’s version of the scrolls was right, or if Heaven’s were, was yet to be seen. “Like why you’re resistant to being stabbed now, for example.”

“And why you are, too.” Evie pressed her cheek to my chest, wincing. “If it wasn’t for these contractions, I’d think I was immortal right now.”

“Immortal,” I repeated as I pushed myself to the top speed I could fly at. “That’s it, isn’t it?”

“What’s it?” Evie’s fingers dug in my neck as she struggled to find something to hold onto through her labor pains. “You’re going to have to spell this out for me again, handsome. My brain’s a little too buzzy to make educated guesses right now.”

“This baby,” I explained. “Whatever ties it has to the Almighty. Every moment we’re bathed in that golden glow—our marriage, your coronation, the way your aura turned gold instead of dark when you became infernal—it’s all led to this moment right now.”

“You think...” Evie paused to take a deep gasp of breath. “The baby has made it so we can’t die?”

“Or the Almighty has,” I said. “I don’t know if we’re demons or angels or something entirely different now—but I think, somehow, this was all part of the plan. We’re eternal. Impossible to harm. Impossible to kill.”

“I can feel it,” Evie said with a quick nod. “It’s... some kind of protection over us.”

“Whatever it is and whoever it’s from, we’ll take it.” I spotted the hospital down below and dove for it. “We’re going to be parents, love. No matter who tries to stop us, we’re going to survive to raise this child—and it’s going to survive, too.”

There wasn’t a doubt in me. Not in my heart. Not in mind.

Not in my soul.

INSIDE, I handed Evie off to the nurses in the emergency room. They took her away on a stretcher—but not before I stole one last kiss from her lips.

Not a goodbye this time.

Just a *good luck*.

Once she was gone, I had a hard time knowing what to do with myself. I wasn’t used to being in hospitals. They didn’t exactly know how to deal with mystical wounds.

One of the nurses directed me to a waiting room outside of the maternity ward. It was small and quiet, but that almost made me more restless.

I made my way outside instead, summoned a pack of cigarettes into existence, and burned through them all without smoking them, just to have something to do with my hands.

“First time, huh?” a balding human said as he came out and saw me standing there in a cloud of smoke. “You shouldn’t worry. When my first

kid was born, I smoked an entire pack while waiting too.” He laughed, sounding a little embarrassed. “Every time my wife has gone into delivery since, it gets a little harder to give them up.”

“Difficult habit to quit.” I thought about offering him one, but if he wanted to stop, that hardly seemed wise. “How many children do you have now?”

“Three,” he said. “One more on the way right now.”

“Brave of you.” If my suspicions were right, I had nothing to worry about in regard to Evie’s safety through labor. If a spear through her side didn’t kill her, childbirth was hardly likely to finish her off. But my nerves were still raw with anticipation anyway. I could hardly imagine feeling like a second time, let alone a fourth.

“It’s not brave,” the man said with a shrug. “It’s just life. I love my wife. I love my kids. They make everything else worth it, you know?”

“I do,” I said softly. *I did*. I put the cigarette out and let it slip into the trashcan at my side, then offered him my hand. “Luke.”

“Jim,” he said, giving me a firm shake. “Nice to meet you.”

As I clasped his hand, I let a little trickle of my power flow into him.

I liked Jim, I’d decided. If this was his fourth time doing this, he more than deserved a little gift for his efforts.

He’d never want to smoke again after today—and in a few weeks, he’d be surprised to notice that his hair was coming back as well.

“Likewise,” I said with a smile. “And good luck.”

EVIE’S LABOR lasted into the wee hours of morning. Lock, Mal and Don all arrived in turn to wait with me in shifts.

It was kind of them. In the brief moments of conversation we bothered to make, I knew that they all had their own hurts to deal with right now. Their losses were written all over their faces.

Lock and Joan. Mal and Ava. Don and Bea. I’d finally secured a future for my wife and my child and myself, but in the process, all three of my closest friends had lost the women that they cared for.

Maybe even the women that they loved.

“How are the Fallen doing?” I asked Don as he sat in the waiting room with me. It was nearing three in the morning now. The last update on Evie from the nurses said she was doing well, but if this baby was really so impatient to be born, I wished he would hurry the hell up.

“Fighting amongst themselves for power like always,” Don said with a dark chuckle. “Lock is staying out of it, but the other four... let’s just say you’re lucky that you’ve managed to wash your hands of them.”

“I’m not surprised.”

If they’d come to the same conclusion I’d had about that glowing golden light that had surrounded Evie and me, then they’d be fighting over who would rule Hell in our place for decades, I imagined. They’d never been able to come to any agreements without my help.

Mulciber was too short-sighted. Mammon, too greedy. Beelzebub was too ambitious, and Belial, too lazy.

Lock was the only one among them I trusted, and he knew well enough to stay out of the fray while the others tore each other apart.

“And how are you doing?”

Don scoffed. “I think you know the answer to that.”

“Have you thought at all about what you’re going to do now?” I asked.

“Drink myself into a coma so I can forget about Bea,” he said with a harsh laugh. “Or, at least, try. It’s the one downfall about how fast we demons process alcohol, isn’t it? Can’t even drink her away now.”

“I’m sorry,” I said, and meant it. “I know how it feels to lose the woman you love.”

“I know you do. Nothing to do about it now, though.” Don clenched his jaw and stared at the wall up ahead. There was a painting on it of a landscape—dark earth, white sky, and a golden glow between them on the horizon. I couldn’t quite tell if it was supposed to be a sunrise or a sunset. “She’s safe. That’s what matters. I just have to figure out what to do with myself to keep busy in her absence, I guess.”

Slowly, an idea was forming in my mind. Almost like it had been placed there by someone other than myself.

A little golden seed, planted in my brain and gradually growing into something strong. Something good.

“Have you ever thought about ruling Hell yourself?” I asked. “You’d make a good king.”

“Me? Of course not,” Don scoffed. “Mal would be a better choice. Or Lock. Anyone but the other Fallen, really. I don’t know a thing about ruling kingdoms. I’d be useless on my own.”

“Maybe you wouldn’t have to do it on your own, then.” I glanced at him with a wicked idea glinting in my eyes. “Why don’t you bring Mal

and Lock here? If we're clever about this, all of the problems of succession might soon be solved."

"Dawnstar..." Don said, his voice low with trepidation. "I don't think that's a—"

"Mr. Dawnstar?" a nurse called out as she appeared in the doorway of the waiting room. There was an excited smile on her lips. "Your wife and your baby are ready to see you now."

My heart leapt in my chest as, immediately, I rose to my feet.

"Stop thinking so much," I told Don over my shoulder as I moved to follow the nurse down the hall. "Just get Mal and Lock here. You three should all meet this baby together, I think."

More importantly, Evie and I would need them here for everything that was yet to come.

The nurse took me to the private recovery room that I'd requested for Evie. They'd promised me the biggest, nicest one they had—and I was happy that they'd managed to make good on that request.

"Luke." She turned her head to me, smiling when she saw me in the doorway. Her hair, so much less heavy now that it was cropped to her shoulders, was glowing golden in the low light, and so was she. "I missed you."

"I missed you too. You have no right looking that beautiful after so many hours of labor." She looked tired, too, but there was something glorious about the way her cheeks were flushed and that sparkle in her lovely gray eyes. I wanted to go to her immediately, but instead, I lingered in the doorway, just taking her in.

In her arms, she held a blanket swaddled around something gently wriggling against her breast.

"Come here, handsome," Evie beckoned. "I have someone I want you to meet."

I took a deep breath, then took a step forward.

"My son," I whispered, meeting her smile with one of my own.

"No," said Evie.

"No?"

She moved the blanket back, revealing an angry pink face and a pair of inquisitive eyes. The baby's irises had a starburst pattern to them. Gray in the center, then swirls of pale blue around the edges, all contained within a

dark ring. Already, the baby had peach fuzz hair. Dark like mine, but at their temple, white-blond.

"Your daughter," Evie explained. "It's a girl."

"A... girl." I blinked, taking that fact in.

God. Maybe both of the prophecies had been wrong.

"Are you disappointed?" Evie asked, knitting her brow with concern.

"No," I said immediately. "She's perfect."

Evie's smile returned quickly. "I think so too."

"Can I..." I reached for our little girl and brushed my fingertips against her cheek. She was so small. Being two months early, I supposed that was normal. But despite that, she looked so fully formed. Already, she was her own little person. She cooed softly and closed her eyes as my fingers met her skin. "Can I hold her?"

"Of course. Careful of her head, though. Make sure to hold it up."

I was.

Through all of Evie's lifetimes, I'd never imagined that I would ever love anything as much as I loved her.

But in that moment, as I stared down at the bright, beautiful eyes of the life we'd created together, now cradled in my arms...

My heart pounded. My chest flooded with warmth.

In that moment, I proved myself wrong.

"We never decided on a name," Evie said as I held our girl. "Any ideas?"

"She'll need something beautiful." Something just as lovely as she was. "Jezebel, maybe. Or... How do you feel about Dolly Parton? We could always call her Jolene."

"I think naming our baby girl after an infamous temptress might be shooting ourselves in the feet, sweetheart," Evie said with a laugh. "Looking like she does, you're going to be fending off enough boys when she gets older as it is."

A low growl escaped my throat as I imagined *any* boy thinking he was good enough to claim my perfect little girl.

"I see your point," I admitted. "What about... have you considered giving her your name?"

"Evelyn Dawnstar the Second?" Evie laughed again. "That seems a little prideful, naming her after me. And she doesn't look like an Evie, either. It'd just be confusing, wouldn't it?"

“No. I mean, your original name. Lilith,” I said. “Or... maybe something shorter.”

“Lily,” Evie whispered. Her eyes lit up as her lips formed the sound. “That’s it, isn’t it?”

“I think so.” I smiled down at baby Lily. “Definitely not the name of a destroyer of worlds, either.”

“Destroyer of worlds?” Lock’s brogue sounded from behind us. I turned to find him, Don and Mal all standing in the doorway. “That wee bairn is too small to destroy anything but his nappies, you ask me.”

“Good point.” I gave them a nod of recognition. “But I’m proud to announce that it’s a girl.”

“A girl?” Don arched an eyebrow. “But the prophecy...”

“It was wrong.” Maybe both of them were. Heaven’s version and Hell’s alike. “We’ve named her Lily.”

“Pretty name.” Mal still didn’t look happy to be here. Probably because he suspected why the three of them had been called. But he smiled down at baby Lily anyway. He’d always had a fatherly soft spot for small, innocent things. “Congrats, you two. You’ve finally done it, haven’t ya?”

“That’s why I’m glad you’re all here,” I said. “Now that Lily’s here in the world... there’s something we need to discuss with you all.”

“There is?” Evie asked, confused.

“There is,” Don grumbled. “And none of us are going to like it, and none of us have any better options, I’m afraid.”

“You’ll need to abdicate, love,” I told Evie. “I don’t know that either of us will be able to return to Hell now—and I don’t want to take the chance of seeing you harmed for trying.”

“Oh.” Evie blinked. “I... hadn’t even thought about my crown. We’ve been a little busy with other things, I guess.”

“Very true.” I nodded to Don, Mal and Lock. “I think you should name them your successors. The Fallen will tear the realm apart with their infighting until a new ruler is crowned, and I don’t want them pounding down our door when they finally realize that you’re the one who chooses the next king.”

“Me neither,” Evie agreed. “But... all three of them? Can I do that?”

“None of us would take the title on our own,” Mal explained with a grimace. “Hell, I don’t reckon any of us want it as is. But Dawnstar’s right, per usual. It’s the best option any of us have.”

Lock and Don nodded in agreement. None of them looked happy about this arrangement, but at least it would probably keep their minds off the loves they'd just lost.

"In that case..." Evie pursed her lips as she searched for the right words. "I, Queen Evelyn Dawnstar of Hell, abdicate in favor of Moloch, Abaddon, and Malacoda. The new kings of Hell."

"Long live the blood fucking kings, then," Lock grumbled. "And may the Almighty bless our reigns like He's blessed yer wee family—for we'll certainly need it."

"Good." That was taken care of, then. "I'll leave you all to let the Fallen know that they've missed out on yet another power grab, in that case. Let me know when you've arranged your coronations." I smirked. "I'll send flowers."

"You'd better," Don said with a glower.

"Reckon we'll have all earned 'em by then," Mal agreed, arms crossed over his chest.

I turned to Evie and handed Lily back to her.

"That just leaves one last consideration," I said. "Where we should go next. Since the Inferno and Pandemonium are both out."

"Not here in Vegas," Evie said with a sigh. "I know it's your city, Luke, but I'm not sure it's where I want to raise a potential future antichrist."

I chuckled. "Maybe she'll just be a normal little girl. Anything's possible now. But... can I make a suggestion?"

"Of course. We can go anywhere, right?"

"I'm just thinking how nice it might be to raise Lily close to her grandparents," I said slowly. I knew Evie wouldn't love this idea, but maybe it would grow on her in time. "I could always buy us a house nearby. How do you feel about Vermont?"

The laugh burst from Evie's lips like fireworks. They lingered in her eyes, sparkling and bright.

"Woodstock," she said, shaking her head. "Of course you'd say that."

"Will you at least consider it?"

"Oh, what the hell." She brushed her fingers against Lily's peach fuzz hair. "Let's do it. My parents will be thrilled."

EVIE

One Year Later...

Woodstock, Vermont

I never thought waking up to the sound of a baby crying would make me smile.

But as Lily's cries stirred me awake and my eyes slowly opened to the darkest hours of early morning, I found my lips curling into a gentle, easy grin.

The house Luke bought for us was old but beautiful. The natural wood floors creaked beneath my feet as I slipped them into my slippers and rose. I could feel the subtle warmth of a newly stoked fire crackling away in the woodstove that heated the bedroom that Luke and I shared. I pulled a cashmere shawl on over my silk nightie anyway. Spring would arrive soon enough, but until it was here for sure, mornings in Vermont tended to run shivery and cold.

Lily's cries quieted as I headed toward the hall. I was only halfway there when I realized why.

Luke's figure appeared in the doorway of the bedroom with our sweet, dark-haired little girl swaddled in his arms.

“Shh, little bird. Don’t want to wake mummy, do you?” he said, brushing the blonde streak in her hair out of her eyes and pressing a fingertip to her pouting lips. He wore a pair of black silk pajama pants and no shirt, giving me a view of his gorgeous, muscled chest. When he glanced up and saw me standing there before him, he almost looked surprised. Then, beneath the thick, well-kempt beard he’d grown out of his stubble, his mouth curled into a smile. “Ah. Looks like we’re too late. Morning, love. Sorry for the ruckus.”

“Morning, handsome.” I popped up on my tiptoes to place a kiss on his lips, then dipped down to give Lily one on her cheek. “Is she hungry?”

“Might be,” Luke admitted. “I was going to see if I couldn’t rock her back to sleep before I tried the bottle.”

“It’s all right. I forgot to pump last night anyway. I’ve got plenty of milk right here,” I said with a little laugh, squeezing one of my breasts gently. It felt nearly ready to burst.

“Goddess,” Luke whispered fondly as he passed Lily into my arms. “Here. Come sit in the rocking chairs with me.”

Luke put his arm around my waist and guided me to the antique rocking chairs he’d refinished. They were close to the woodstove. The air around them was already flushed with warmth.

As I sat down in the chair and slipped my breast from my nightie, I took a moment to appreciate how quiet it was here. Serene, even. This was nothing like the bright lights and constant bustle of Las Vegas. The house was perched up on a ridge, surrounded by pine trees and overlooking Woodstock below.

It was picturesque. Everything about my life was now.

But it still felt crazy that after everything, *this* was the life we’d ended up with.

“Did you ever dream you’d spend the rest of your days in Vermont, of all places?” I asked as Lily latched.

Luke shifted behind me to rub my shoulders while I fed our girl. “Maybe not. But I like it here anyway. It’s comfortable. It’s peaceful. And best of all, I have the two of you.”

“Still seems a little cold for your tastes,” I teased. “Compared to Hell, anyway.”

“You’re the one who doesn’t like the cold,” Luke countered. Even through the shawl, I could feel the warmth of his hands. “It’s nice,

actually. You know how much I love an opportunity to keep you warm. Besides, I like Woodstock. Brings back old memories.”

“You’ve been here before?” If so, this was the first time he’d ever mentioned it.

“No. But the name... the last time I was at a Woodstock, it was 1969 in Bethel, New York.”

“Bethel, huh?” I blinked as my brain slowly made the connection. “Wait—you mean *Woodstock*, Woodstock. The music festival.”

“The very same. You and I had a full, blissful day of listening to music and falling in love. You were very receptive to my charms last time, you know. Shame that the angels crashed the party.”

He bent down and kissed the starburst on my cheek. A little flash of memory came with it. Through my own eyes, I saw Luke shirtless and glistening with sweat. Janis Joplin was wailing on a stage behind him as I pulled a flower from my hair and tucked it behind Luke’s ear.

He was smiling with pure love in his eyes. I was smiling, too. I felt that same love for him pounding in my chest.

I blinked and the memory faded.

“We were happy,” I said softly. I knew that it must have ended badly—our past lives together always had—but now that we’d finally gotten a chance to have happiness forever and for real, that fact hurt so much less.

“We were,” Luke agreed. His thumb pressed deep into the muscles where my shoulders met my neck, easing away the knots that had formed there in the night. “And we are. Do you want me to show you more?”

“No, but thank you.” I glanced over my shoulder to smile at him. “I’m happy enough living in the here and now. We have everything we need here. A beautiful home, free babysitting whenever we want it...” Luke had bought a house for my parents just down the road, and they were always eager for as much time with their granddaughter as they could get.

“Our little girl and each other,” Luke finished. “I see what you mean. Out of all the lives we could have had together, I’m glad this is the one that stuck.”

“You don’t miss ruling over Hell at all?” I’d asked him that question many times before. His answer was always the same.

But some part of me found it hard to believe that the Devil himself had really given all of the glitz and glamour and power of his life as King of Hell just to be with...

Well, with *me*.

“Not a bit, silly girl.” Luke moved his fingers into the roots of my hair and massaged my scalp in pleasant, slow little circles. “Wish I would have done it sooner. It was all getting a little boring, truth be told.”

“And this isn’t?”

“Are you joking?” Luke sounded inordinately surprised. “My days are filled with chopping wood and making pancakes. Playing with my daughter and fucking my beautiful wife. What more could I possibly want?”

“Your own beer brewery,” I joked. “A maple syrup brand?”

“I’ve been thinking about getting into brewing beer, actually,” Luke mused. “I have some excellent old recipes from Sumeria that I’d like to try my hand at again.”

I laughed. “Of course you do. I should have never let you grow out your beard. You’re going to be a mountain man in no time at all.”

The sound of tiny feet came from the hall. We both turned our gazes to the doorway as The Beast waddled in. He was chubbier now than he’d been as a puppy, but no less adorable for it.

“You’re going to have to stop feeding him sausages beneath the table at breakfast,” I warned Luke. “If he puts on any more weight, we’re going to have to put him on a diet.”

“I know, I know. But I can tell how bad he wants them.” Luke drew his fingers out of my hair and went to scratch The Beast behind his perky ears. “And I can’t help but sympathize with a man who will do anything to get what he wants.”

“Was he sleeping in Lily’s room again?”

“Wedged as close to her crib as he could get,” Luke confirmed. “I think he’d jump up into it and cuddle up right next to her if his little legs weren’t so short. *Shake*, boy.”

Luke offered The Beast his hand, and The Beast raised a paw to place on Luke’s fingers in return.

“Good boy,” Luke said with admiration. “Maybe only one sausage this morning, then—but I’m not cutting you off quite yet.”

The Beast waddled over to my feet and lay down between them. Not long after he closed his eyes, his legs were kicking in his dreams.

“What do you think The Beast dreams about?” I asked Luke. “World domination, or dominating breakfast buffets?”

“Chasing angels and demons, no doubt.” Luke moved to the window of our balcony, where the sun was beginning to peek up over the horizon. He drew the curtains back to let the light in. “And they’d all deserve it, too.”

Gently, I frowned.

There was only one thing imperfect about this life that we’d created together.

Well. Three things, really.

“Do you think Ava and Joan and Bea are happy?” I knew it was for the best that they’d forgotten about Heaven and Hell, but still, I missed them all. Their friendship had gotten me through some hard times. It had gotten them through some bad ones as well.

“Ignorance is bliss, I suppose.” Luke turned to me again, a sad smile on his lips. “At least now they’ll be able to go on with their lives in peace. But I know how hard losing them was on you. I’m sorry, love.”

“It’s okay,” I said, nodding. “You’re right. They gave up a lot for us while we were trying to set things right. I do miss them, but I’m glad they’re safe. I hope they stay that way.”

I still checked their Instagrams from time to time. Bea would be getting married in a few months. Ava and Joan would be her bridesmaids. They’d all finished up their degrees. Ava had taken over her family’s flower shop and Joan had just landed a job with the UN.

“If they only knew what they’d lost, love, they’d miss you too.” Luke came back over to me as Lily finished feeding. He held his arms out for her and cradled her against his shoulder, rubbing and patting her back until she burped. The sound was loud enough, it made us both laugh. “But you shouldn’t worry about their safety. It’s not like Don and Lock and Mal to let those three wander the Earth unattended. They might not remember anything about Hell, but the Kings of Hell certainly remember them.”

“I hope you’re right.” I suspected he was. Don, Lock and Mal had all loved my friends in their own ways. If I knew anything about infernal passions—and I was pretty sure I did—they ran deeper than memories. Longer than lifetimes.

Luke’s friends in Hell would make damn sure that my friends here on Earth never came to any harm.

“Sun’s coming up.” Luke glanced at the balcony again, then passed Lily back to me. He offered me his hand as well. “Want to watch it?”

"I'd love that." Lily was dozing again now. She always got sleepy when she was full. Wrapped up in her soft blue blanket, she was snuggly and warm. I shifted her into the crook of one arm and took Luke's hand. "Let's go."

But as Luke led me out onto the balcony, I saw his wings unfurl from his bare shoulder blades. They were more impressive than ever now. White, like an angel's, tipped with black, like a demon's.

The best of both worlds.

"Oh," I said with a little laugh. "You didn't mean that we'd just watch the sun from the balcony, did you?"

"I was thinking we might enjoy the view from a little higher up," said Luke. "If you're willing, of course."

I smiled. There was a wicked glint in Luke's eyes that always led to something good.

"Let's go," I agreed, and Luke whisked me up into his arms while I cradled Lily in my own.

His wings unfurled to their full span, then flapped hard as he took flight.

The higher up Luke flew us, the more beautiful little Woodstock looked below. The trees were frosted with the final snow of the season. The sunrise on the horizon had painted the sky a beautiful red and royal purple.

It was so lovely for a moment that it took my breath away.

It was colder up here, but Luke and Lily were both so warm, it was easy for me to stay warm too.

"This is really our life now, isn't it?" I whispered up at Luke. "Sometimes, it still seems too good to be true."

"Our lives will be whatever we want to make of them," said Luke. He pressed the side of his nose to my temple and nuzzled against my skin as he flew. "I still want to take you to the ocean. I haven't forgotten that little red bikini of yours yet."

"Mm. And I still want to see you in a pair of tight swim trunks," I agreed. "Maybe when Lily's a little older, we could go on vacation together. All of us, as a family. Dad's been talking retirement lately, and Mom always has summers off."

"Perfect," Luke breathed. His nose trailed down my cheeks as his lips sought out mine. "Just like you."

Bathed in the warm glow of sunrise and the nippy chill of the air, we kissed. Every time, it felt like it was our first.

Better than our first, actually.

Now, I knew there'd never be a last.

Our kiss was broken only when Lily stirred. Her little legs kicked as she tried to wiggle out of the blanket. As she leaned out of my arms, cooing and reaching for the sun, my heart leapt up in my chest.

I clutched her tight against my body before she fell. Her brow furrowed at this denial of freedom, but the laugh on my breath was one of relief.

"Dangerous little bird," Luke said, chuckling. "She wants to fly too."

"No flying until you're older," I said down to her, my voice stern. "You're too still too little."

Lily only frowned even deeper. Her lips were pursed in a petulant pout.

"Mama," she said, reaching for the sun once more with her chubby little fist. "Sun! Sun!"

"I know," I cooed back to her. She could say so many words now. *Papa* and *Beastie* and *more*. Far more than she should have been able to for her age—but I suspected that her ever-growing vocabulary was far from the only thing special about her.

The prophecies about our daughter still weighed on me sometimes.

Hell's scrolls claimed she'd bring about great change to our world. Sometimes, it seemed like that was exactly what Earth needed.

But Heaven's scrolls said that she would bring about the end of days. It was hard to imagine such a sweet little girl could end existence itself—but we still didn't know which set of prophecies was true.

We didn't even know if either of them were true at all—or who would have so much to gain from such world-shattering lies if one or both ended up being false.

All we could do was raise her well. We'd love her. We'd teach her to love in return.

The sunrise was turning golden. It reminded me of a different love—one from the Almighty, who I was still certain smiled down on Lily every day.

Maybe love was the answer. It had been for Luke and me.

With enough love, I knew, Lily would be able to make sure that any changes she brought to our reality were only for the greater good.

“She’s getting restless,” I told Luke as Lily continued to kick. The blue and gray swirls of her eyes were still focused ambitiously on the horizon. She *really* wanted to reach out and catch that sun. “Maybe you should fly us back, before she tries to throw herself out of my arms again.”

“Falling is a family trait now, I suppose,” Luke said as he turned us around.

“Will you make us pancakes for breakfast?” I asked hopefully as my stomach rumbled beneath Lily’s weight. “Those chocolate chip ones you do so well. You know how much she likes when we let her have little bites.”

“Only if you make the coffee,” Luke bargained. “It always tastes better when you pour it into my mug.”

“Deal,” I agreed. Lily whimpered in disappointment, still wriggling desperately as the sun disappeared behind Luke’s wings. “And then—Lily! Shh. You don’t want to grab the sun, silly thing. Your father might have survived his fall, but I don’t want to test our luck with you just yet.”

“Devil’s daughter, Devil’s luck,” quipped Luke. “She might just surprise you.”

“And how’s your luck looking these days?” I asked him.

“Oh, it’s looking up,” Luke said, smirking. “With you two in my life, it always is. When we go back to Vegas next, I’ll play a few rounds of poker and win us a fortune.”

“You’re already the richest man in the world, Luke,” I reminded him. “Do you really think you need more?”

“Mm. Maybe not.” Luke flew us back to our beautiful home on our beautiful ridge, dusted with snow and surrounded by deep green pines. “I have everything I need right here in my arms.”

DON

Beatrice. It was the name of my first love. I'd always thought she'd be my last.

I'd loved her more than the sky loved to hold the sun. She'd brightened the darkness of my world. She'd put color into the grays and blacks that made up my entire life.

She'd made me happy.

She'd made me feel things I'd never thought possible. Things I'd never felt before and hadn't felt since.

Just like the sky lost the sun to the dark of night, I'd lost her, too. It had all happened so many years ago, it shouldn't have mattered anymore.

But it did.

Or at least, it had.

Right up until that first moment I'd laid eyes on a new Beatrice, sitting there with all her friends and my comrades in the lounge of Heresy. She was much like the last one, from the richness of her beauty to the fire of her temper, for a single, blissful moment, I'd genuinely believed that the Almighty had decided to bring my love back for another cycle. Another try, just like Lucifer and his Lilith had been given.

A second chance.

For all I knew, maybe He had.

If so, he really was a cruel god.

She'd made me laugh. She'd made my body awaken, my cock stir, my heart pound. For so long, I'd felt like a dead man walking through the colorless limbo of the Abyss.

For so long, I'd walked alone.

Every time I had her by my side, she brought me back to life.

And today, on this cursed, sunny morning, I'd lose her all over again.

Just like the first time, she'd been promised to another man.

Today, he'd make her his bride.

I lurked on the edges of the garden party at her father's estate. I didn't have an invitation, but I was a king of Hell now. I hardly needed one. If any of those security guards I'd spied in their overpriced suits came my way asking for one, I'd send them wandering off through the hedge maze, thinking of kittens and posies and rainbows.

If that didn't work, I supposed I'd just have to break their arms. With the way I'd overheard them talking about all the filthy things they'd like to do to Bea's bridesmaids, they certainly deserved it.

But that was a last resort. My goal wasn't to be noticed today. Keeping a low profile was paramount.

It wasn't like anyone here was going to recognize me.

Least of all, the bride herself.

I scowled as I moved through the rosebushes that grew thick and wild toward the back of the estate. They were untamed compared to the rest of the perfectly manicured gardens.

They reminded me of her.

Every rose was as thick as a fist and deep red. It had always been my favorite color on Bea's lips.

Beneath those roses, though...

I was careful to mind all the thorns.

When I drew near to the side of the house, I found the roses began to climb up a trellis attached to the stucco of the outer wall. They led all the way up to a white marble balcony that overlooked the rose gardens.

And standing there, leaning against the railing...

There she was.

Her long, chestnut hair was curled into beautiful, thick waves like a dark ocean. Her lips were that deep red that I loved so much. Always had. She wore a Zuhair Murad wedding dress, elegant yet dramatic, with a bodice that cupped her full breasts like my hands once had. Her lovely

face was partially concealed by a Mantilla veil, but despite that, I could tell she was crying.

It made my chest ache just to watch.

She couldn't see me, but I could see her. I wanted to call out her name, climb up the trellis and comfort her, but I knew I couldn't.

She didn't know who I was anymore.

More proof of a cruel god.

I was a stranger to her now. The moment that I thought she might finally be mine, Bea's memory of all things contained within Heaven and Hell had been erased. Including me.

Especially me.

The only blessing within that curse was that I could still watch over her without her noticing.

To Bea, I wasn't anything more than just another face in the crowd now.

The sounds of her tears were heartbreaking. But as my ears perked up to her gentle crying, I heard something else.

From the other side of the thicket of rosebushes, something more sinister was whispering furtively.

As difficult as it was to tear my focus away from Bea, I did.

Furtive whispers had no place at a wedding. My suspicion was immediately roused at the sound.

"Stop worrying, Simon. It's almost over now." The voice that whispered was deep and dark. There was something inhuman about its charms. Something positively demonic, in fact. "You've done well. Your father will be proud."

The voice was familiar to me. It called to a memory that I couldn't entirely place.

Where had I heard that voice before?

"And when it's over, she won't be my problem anymore?" Simon's voice was far too eager. I recognized it as the voice of Bea's husband-to-be. "If she'd only obey me, it'd be different. But as things are... it would all be so much easier if she would simply go away."

I had to fight back the growl rising in my throat.

They were obviously talking about Beatrice. *My* Beatrice. Whether she knew she was or not.

And the things they were saying...

There was no way this could be anything good.

“She’ll be gone forever soon. Then, you’ll be free to do whatever you like.” I could hear a smile on the lips of the first voice. It wasn’t a nice smile. Not in the least. “Just play your part until the wedding night. Then, we’ll take care of the rest.”

“Thank God,” Simon breathed. “I’m so ready for this whole ordeal to be done.”

“Don’t thank the Almighty, boy.” A harsh chuckle came from the other side of the bushes. I tried to peer through the foliage to see who that laugh belonged to, but they were too thick. There was no way to part the bushes without risking detection. “Remember who you are now. Thank your father. Thank *me*.”

“Yes. Thank you,” said Simon. “I appreciate this. Really.”

“No trouble at all.” I heard a hiss of smoke that I recognized as the sound of an infernal entity dematerializing from this plane. As the scent of sulfur filled the air, the voice lingered behind. “Pleasure’s all mine.”

I glanced back up at Bea. Had she heard any of what I’d just heard? She was obviously in danger. Did she have any idea how much or what kind?

Apparently not. She was busy dabbing her eyes dry with a handkerchief and moving back into the room beyond the balcony, completely oblivious to the conversation occurring below.

I hadn’t just come here to watch over Bea, and I knew it.

I’d come here to try to say goodbye.

I’d never fully understood Bea’s engagement. I knew her father and Simon’s father were business partners. International banking moguls who wanted to keep the business in the family after they died. That much, I supposed, I could make sense of.

What I couldn’t understand was why she went along with it. Why her father’s wishes and will were so much more important to her in her mind than her own.

But now, I knew that this arranged marriage of hers was far more sinister than I’d previously realized.

Her husband had no intentions of being a good one.

He’d made a deal with a demon. One who was certain he could make her disappear.

Not on my watch.

I brushed aside the rosebushes, putting on my most charming grin as I approached the fair-haired, olive-skinned Simon. The man who'd been lucky enough to have a woman like Bea handed to him.

The man who was so eager to throw her away.

"Simon! How are you?" I kept my voice friendly, but gruff. It was the way I was sure his father's business associates greeted each other. To finish the effect, I struck out a hand for him to shake. "Congratulations on your big day."

"What? Ah... thank you." Simon appeared startled to see me.

Good. He should have been.

"Not getting cold feet, I hope?" I asked as I shook his hand.

"Um. Pardon me for asking, but... who are you?"

I could have said so many things in that moment.

I could have lied.

But as I took on Simon's appearance, from his tanned skin to his fair, tousled hair, right down to the tuxedo he wore, I knew I'd enjoy torturing him with what I was about to do so much more.

"I'm your worst nightmare, boy." I let him stare at me in horror for a moment as he took in the fact that I now wore his appearance like a well-cut suit.

Then, as he opened his mouth to scream, I decked him hard enough to send his eyes rolling back and his body slumping to the ground.

The wedding would go on as planned. Maybe, if I played my cards right, so would the honeymoon.

But whatever demonic misdeeds Simon and his infernal friend had in store for Bea would not.

Not on my watch.

I dipped down to pluck the unconscious Simon's boutonniere—a lovely white rose—from his lapel so I could pin it to my own.

Then, I opened a portal to the Abyss and nudged his body in with the toe of my Italian leather shoe.

Now, there was no evidence that anything was amiss.

There never would be.

I left the rose garden with a slight spring in my step and smirk on my lips.

I'd protect Bea. I'd save her from anyone who meant to do her harm.

And now, I'd marry her, too.

The day was suddenly beginning to look like it would be a good one after all.



Get The Demon King's Bride



Marrying a demon king wasn't part of my wedding plans . . .

I always knew I'd marry Simon. We may not love each other, but as my father's sole heir, a union with Simon will ensure our family's fortunes remain safe.

Only there's nothing safe about the man standing opposite me on the altar. This man speaks words of love and passion. Words I know Simon would never say.

Then my groom kisses me, and my world breaks apart.

Simon would never kiss me like this. But this man . . .

Dark-haired, gray-eyed, and sinisterly handsome, and nothing like my intended. Surely I must be dreaming?

Then he whisks me away to our honeymoon, to a place I don't recognize. He tells me I'm in danger, and that Simon wants me dead. That he has the power to protect me.

How does he know this? Because he's Abaddon. Don for short. Not that his nickname makes it any better when he's one of the Three Kings of Hell.

It turns out I've gone and married a demon . . . oh, and it gets better. Apparently, we've known each other before and he's convinced we're destined to be together.

Do I risk losing my heart to my dangerously dark husband? And if I trust him, will I come out alive?

The Demon King's Bride is the fourth book in the Married To The Devil paranormal romance fantasy series that can be read as a standalone and features a sexy, dark hero you'll be aching to follow to hell and back.

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THE DEMON KING'S BRIDE

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FOREWORD

*“Io mi senti' svegliar dentro a lo core
Un spirito amoroso che dormia:
E poi vidi venir da lungi Amore
Allegro sì, che appena il conoscia”*

—Dante Alighieri
La Vita Nuova, “I Felt My Heart Awaken”

PROLOGUE

DON

I hate to break it to you, darling, but the first time I fell in love? It tasted just like you.

Golden honey, warmed by sunshine. Tart, luscious cherries. A rich, full-bodied red wine.

That first time, love was a brief sweetness that dissolved on my tongue far too quickly.

It tasted just like your lips.

I'll let you decide which set of those I mean.

That was centuries ago, of course. I loved, and I lost, and I knew damn well that I'd never love again. Not after losing her. Not after she was gone.

And then, it happened anyway.

Then, I met you.

My Beatrice. You share the name of my first love, you know. Sometimes, out of the corner of my eye, I think for a moment that you even share her face.

When I first saw you, it was like watching her walk right back into my life again. You have her same long, shapely legs. Her deep brown eyes. Her luscious, dusky rose lips. You have her long, slender neck, perfect for sinking my teeth into, and her thick, dark waves of silken hair, just begging to be wound around my fist.

You have her smile and her laugh. When you made my cock hard, there were moments that I was so certain the two of you were one and the same.

It felt impossible—but I've spent enough time between Earth and Hell through the millennia to know that if there's one thing that's full of infinite possibility, it's the thing that our hearts want.

You were wildfire, burning clear through every wall of vines and thorns that I'd ever built up around myself.

You were a cool breeze that blew in through the ashes, soothing the scorched earth of my infernal heart.

You made me believe in second chances.

You made me believe in fate.

Maybe a little too much, even.

History has a terrible way of repeating itself. Just like I lost that first love, I lost you as well. You and I were always going to be two star-crossed creatures. We knew that from the start. Just like last time, you were promised to another by the time I found you.

And now, at the hands of angels, every memory you ever had of me—in this life, or another—has been stolen away as well.

It's your wedding day today, darling. You're the most beautiful bride I've ever laid eyes on, and you're doomed to be married to someone who doesn't deserve to so much as speak your name.

You don't remember me at all. You don't remember being my woman. My secret. My sin. But I remember you.

You're an irritatingly difficult woman to forget.

You don't know this either—not yet—but you're in danger as well.

Your memories of Heaven and Hell might have been taken from you, but the realms of angels and demons are far from done with you yet.

As for me...

I'm a king of Hell now.

I'm done losing.

I've seen my opportunity.

I don't plan on ever losing something as precious as you again.

Your life has been threatened. Your pathetic so-called husband-to-be has been dancing with demons. He knows you'll never belong to him, even without the things I could give you tempting you away. He wants you dead.

So, I took care of it. As you'll soon remember, I'm very good at taking care of things like ungrateful men.

Now, I'll take his place. All the better to protect you, my love.

Come Hell or high water—but especially Hell—I'm going to keep you safe.

Love is hard, Bea, but I'm a very hard man.

You'll soon see *exactly* how hard I can truly be.

Today's my wedding day too, as it turns out. After so long of loving and losing and waiting, I have to admit that I'm excited to become a husband.

Your husband.

Even if you don't know that it's me yet.

I told you, darling, that you made me believe in second chances.

I think it's high time for a lucky third.

BEA

Weddings are hell. Literal fire-and-brimstone, *abandon-all-hope-ye-who-enter-here*, demons with pitchforks in Louboutins and Chanel pantsuits *hell*. Don't let anyone tell you otherwise—they're probably just trying to sell you an overpriced honeymoon cruise.

It's a hell most women walk through eventually.

Today, I was doing it in an Italian lace veil that had been in my family for five hundred years, a pair of vintage Salvatore Ferragamo heels once worn by Marilyn Monroe, and with my tits pressed up to high Heaven in a skin-tight Zuhair Murad gown.

Growing up, I'd always known that real life wasn't made of happy endings. Forget about the romcom stuff. That's all Hollywood movie magic. Nothing more. For me, the only romantic swell of music after the officiant said *you may now kiss the bride* would be the one played by a string quartet on loan from Buckingham Palace. My husband-to-be hadn't won me over after an adorable meet-cute and a grand gesture so beautiful it had warmed even *my* cynical little heart. There would be no dashing hero to rush in and try to stop me from making the biggest mistake of my life, either.

Even if there *had* been a man in my life stupid enough to try that kind of thing, my father's security guards would have tackled and tasered him on sight.

No—everything about my wedding day had been perfectly orchestrated. Timed, staged, and set to run right on cue. Today's festivities had cost a pretty penny, sure—but when your family owns three islands off the coast of Greece and a fleet of matryoshka yachts big enough to make the US Navy green with jealousy, money isn't exactly an object. Could you really put a price on getting hitched—*without* a hitch?

Apparently, no.

And it was all going perfectly, of course. Exactly according to plan.

Except for one thing.

As I walked down the aisle, the man waiting for me at the altar was *not* my fiancé.

I'd been engaged to Simon Roth since the moment I was born. Not officially, of course. That hadn't happened until last year, when he put a diamond as heavy as the Holy Bible on my ring finger. But, growing up, we'd always known that our parents intended for us to become husband and wife.

My father and Simon's owned one of the oldest financial institutions in the world. Through Leviathan Bank, the Argento family and the Roths had been tied to each other since the actual, honest-to-god Crusades. For centuries, our banking empire was passed down from father to oldest son.

Then, I was born.

A disappointment.

A *girl*.

Believe it or not, feminism never quite made it into old money institutions like Leviathan. The rich and powerful men our bank dealt with tended to see women as expensive accessories, not the managers of their extensive fortunes. To them, it was never going to matter how clever or ruthless or charming I was.

Like it or not, some glass ceilings are bulletproof.

So, a deal had been hatched. I'd marry Simon. We'd run Leviathan together as husband and wife. As far as marriage material went, he'd never been particularly inspiring. He wasn't hideous or anything. He was tall and broad-chested, with honey-blond hair and cornflower blue eyes. But he'd always had the temper of a petulant schoolboy and the general attitude of a man who hadn't been told *no* enough as a child.

I'd spent most of my life figuring out how to manage Simon as I resigned myself to my fate. In name, I'd be his wife. In reality, what he

needed was a mommy.

It was hardly a love match, but that didn't matter when you didn't believe in love to begin with.

Maybe that was the reason that my heart skipped a beat as I saw the man standing beneath the arbor of roses, waiting for me at the other end of the aisle.

He was wearing Simon's tuxedo. He was flanked by Simon's groomsmen.

But his hair was dark, thick and sleek. He had the jawline of a male model, the kind who might have been pulled out of a 1950's ad for an expensive cologne. Even beneath Simon's tux, I could tell he had enough muscles to put most Roman statues to shame.

If it was possible to fall in love, I would've sold my soul in a hot second to fall for a man like *him*.

That should have made me suspicious in an instant—except that I was too busy wrangling a completely different confusion.

This man wasn't Simon.

So why the *hell* was I the only one who seemed to have noticed?

Halfway up the aisle, I glanced at my bridesmaids with pleading eyes.

Ava wore a red dress that somehow didn't clash with her copper-colored hair and a smile that said, *You can do this, Bea! Even if it fucking kills you*. She didn't look alarmed at the groom switcheroo in the least.

Joan was scowling beneath her black bangs. I knew that scowl well. It said, *If Simon so much as thinks about getting handsy with you tonight, I'll kill him first*. But as far as the dark-haired man standing in Simon's place went, she wasn't acknowledging his presence at all.

My parents were similarly unperturbed by this error. My mother was doing her best to give me a look of warm encouragement. Not the easiest thing to do through her latest round of Botox, but she managed. My father gave me a dutiful nod. Nothing more.

Not even Simon's own father was affected. He should have been. My marriage to his son meant the continuation of the financial empire that Levi Roth had devoted his entire life to. But as I passed him, his blue eyes glimmered confidently beneath his thick, salt-and-pepper brows and his lips curled into a suave smirk of approval.

He didn't.

What the *fuck*.

I clutched my bouquet of roses and blinked furiously as I considered saying something. I didn't know what—pretty much any words out of my mouth in that moment would have sounded like those of a crazy woman:

"Hello, excuse me, but did someone replace my husband?" sounded just as insane as *"Sorry, but who ordered the hunky stunt double?"*

Even just a simple, *"Where the fuck is Simon?"* would have earned me some crazy looks in that moment. No one else had noticed but me.

As I opened my eyes, I realized the reason why.

The dark-haired man was gone, and Simon was there again. His blue eyes crinkled at the corners as he smiled at me and offered me his hand.

I hesitated before I took it.

God. Had I been hallucinating?

Apparently. That handsome replacement groom was nowhere to be seen anymore.

"Bea," he whispered, glancing down at his hand then meeting my eyes again. "Take my hand."

I was still too stunned to say anything back. Too stunned to move.

If I was hallucinating other men on my own wedding day, I was even more stressed than I'd previously thought.

"All right, then." Simon reached out and curled his fingers around mine, his hand was warm and solid. Definitely real. "Come here."

He drew me toward him with a gentle but firm tug. As I stumbled forward, my heart skipped yet another beat. He caught me against his chest before I lost my balance completely.

His arms wrapped around my body, comforting and strong, as our guests chuckled, and a single wolf whistle cut through the summer air. I knew how I must have looked: so overwhelmed by the sight of my husband-to-be that I'd gotten entirely caught up in the moment. Like a smitten, awe-struck schoolgirl.

In a way, it was how I felt, too.

Simon was here again, but that intense, heady rush of desire I'd experienced when I first saw the figment of my imagination that had briefly replaced him still wasn't gone.

We said our vows with my veil still between us. I stayed on script for mine: love, cherish, obey. But the whole time I repeated the officiant's words, I stared up at Simon through the lace with suspicion in my eyes.

What was that? I wanted to ask him. *Am I crazy, or were you someone else for a second there?*

They weren't questions I could get away with asking, though.

Neither was the most important one of all: *Why haven't I ever felt like this around you before?*

My heart was racing by the time my vows were over. It wasn't just skipping beats anymore. It was playing hopscotch with them.

Suddenly, I was thankful for the cover my veil provided me with.

It hid the way I sniffed the air, trying to catch the scent of burned toast. If anyone heard me, they probably would have assumed I was trying to fight back tears of joy.

In reality, I was trying to make sure I wasn't having a stroke.

It was going to be a relief when all of this was over. I was just on edge. That was probably it. Weddings were hell, sure, but they were still big occasions.

Maybe my body was just confused enough about marrying a man I didn't love that it was trying to make up the difference.

Once we were done tonight, I would get to go to my own suite at the hotel we'd booked for our honeymoon, and Simon would go to his. I'd lock the door and take off this stupid dress and these uncomfortable shoes.

I'd pour myself into a plush king-sized bed and sleep until it was time for our private jet to leave LAX tomorrow. Then I'd spend the next month of my life on a white sand beach in Greece relaxing and trying to forget whatever stupid things I was feeling right now.

That was the plan, anyway.

But then, it was time for Simon's vows.

He didn't stay on script.

"Beatrice Argento." He positioned a thin, golden wedding ring against my fingertip and squeezed my hand. He spoke in Simon's voice...but in a different tone. One that I'd never heard Simon use before. "With this ring..."

Say the words, asshole. My shoulders were tense. My entire body was wound tight like a wire spring. I bit my tongue as Simon allowed the silence to linger for several seconds too long. *Come on. Say them. Stop wasting time, bucko. Let's get this over! Go, go, go!*

Instead of repeating the officiant's words, Simon breathed a laugh and shook his head.

Nope. He wasn't planning on staying on script at all.

"I still remember the first time I saw you, you know." I didn't know how that was possible. The first time we met, we'd been babies. During our parents' dinner parties, we'd shared the same crib. "You were wild and fierce and beautiful. I knew in an instant that I had to make you mine."

In the crowd, a few of our guests murmured with approval. There were breathy gasps and quiet hums and even a few saccharine *awws*.

You're laying it on pretty thick today, buddy. I didn't buy it for a second. It helped, knowing that his words were lies.

Except that in my chest, warmth was stirring.

In my head, I knew what he was saying was bullshit.

But in my heart...it didn't feel like a lie.

Why?

"I've loved you for longer than anyone could ever imagine," Simon went on. His gaze bored through the veil, like he was searching for something behind it. Not my eyes, though.

Something deeper.

It felt like he was trying to stare straight into my soul.

"With this ring, I make you my wife." He smirked with a charming sort of wickedness that I'd never seen before. Not on Simon's lips. "And I make myself the luckiest bastard in the entire world, too."

More laughter from the crowd. Louder, this time.

They were really eating this shit up.

To my horror, on some level, so was I.

Maybe after all these years of knowing Simon...maybe today was the day I realized I'd never actually known him at all?

Maybe I really could come to love him.

I almost laughed.

Maybe Simon was spouting beautiful words right now, but twenty-seven years of knowing him had informed me well of the man he *actually* was. Arrogant. Mercurial. Selfish.

Come to love him? Not fucking likely.

The fact that I was even considering that possibility reassured me that all this wedding nonsense was making me lose my damn mind.

"I pledge myself to you, Bea." I didn't believe his words, but they kept stirring that warmth in my chest anyway. Now, it was burning hot like a flame that threatened to become a wildfire. "I promise you the protection

of my body. The safety of my wealth. The depths of my soul belong to you now.” He slipped the ring on my finger. It was hot too. Like he’d pulled it fresh from the forge. “As does all the love in my heart. Until death...and beyond it, too.”

It was a good thing I’d done my vows first. Even if they did seem entirely lackluster now in comparison to his.

I was speechless.

I knew better than to believe him, but for a second...

Almost.

Almost.

He let go of my hand to reach for the edge of my veil instead. I was shaking as he raised it. I didn’t know why.

On the other side of my veil, it was still Simon’s face staring down at me.

But when my eyes met his...

Those *definitely* weren’t Simon’s eyes.

He settled the veil over my long, dark hair. As he arranged it around my face, his knuckles brushed my cheek and the fire in my chest erupted into roaring, hungry flames.

Simon’s eyes weren’t blue anymore. They were intense, glinting gray. I only had a second to stare into them before he took my face in his hands and pulled me toward him for our kiss.

We’d agreed on just a peck. Something quick and chaste, just to fulfill expectations.

But when Simon’s lips met mine, chaste went right out the window and over a fucking cliff.

He crushed my mouth beneath his like a conqueror claiming the city he’d just burned. It took my breath away. I couldn’t remember how I’d ever managed to breathe at all.

That first kiss was just a taste, though. When his lips moved for a second, they were hungry and relentless. He sucked my lower lip between his teeth, biting down just enough that I whimpered. His tongue slipped into my mouth, flicking against my own tongue. One of his hands left my jaw to wind around my waist instead, so he could pull my body roughly against his.

It wasn’t just my chest that felt on fire now. The flames rose up in my cheeks, flooded my belly, and pooled between my thighs.

My clit throbbed. My lungs burned. My cunt was wetter than it had ever been in all my life. In an instant, those little white lace La Perlas I'd slipped on this morning were soaked.

Before I even realized what I was doing, my hands were dragging greedily over the rough stubble of his jawline (*stubble? He'd been clean-shaven just a second ago...*) and raking through his thick, wavy hair (*wavy? Simon's hair was straight...*)

But despite my confusion, in that moment, I couldn't help myself.

My tongue tangled with his and my lips moved like they were starving for him.

I kissed him back.

The moment was broken only when I heard the saucy whistles and rowdy cheers from the crowd. I didn't know how long we'd been kissing. But when I finally tore myself away from Simon's lips and hazarded a glance back at the wedding guests, it had definitely been for long enough that the standing ovation we were receiving felt well-earned.

I looked up at Simon, wondering what the hell had come over him—what the hell had come over *me*—

But once again, the man in front of me looked nothing like Simon at all anymore.

His dark hair was messy from where my fingers had moved it out of place. His gray eyes were full of the same flames I felt inside my body. And the way he was staring down at me...

Whoever this was, he looked pretty fucking pleased with himself.

He looked like he wanted to do more than just kiss me, too.

Like I was something delicious enough, he wanted to devour me whole.

He was gorgeous and dangerous and fucking *perfect*. A man pulled straight from my wildest, wettest dreams.

Only, I had no goddamn clue who he was.

DON

It was the happiest day of my life.

“Congratulations, Mrs. Roth.” I purred the words down at Bea as I smirked and stroked her cheekbone with my thumb. The moment was perfect except for the fact that I was still having to use her pathetic fiancé’s surname.

Still. She was mine now. If this was the charade I had to play in order to keep her, so be it. I would play it well. No one else here had even noticed that Simon Roth was no longer even in this realm.

“Who the fuck are you?” she hissed back up at me in return.

I chuckled.

Well. Almost no one.

Of course, Bea had realized that whoever I was, I certainly wasn’t her idiot of a groom.

Seeing her walking down the aisle toward me in her tight white gown and her lace veil had excited me enough to make my glamor slip for a moment. I was lucky she looked so stunning. Everyone else’s eyes had been entirely on her.

And kissing her had felt so good, so damn *right*... I knew I’d lost hold of glamor again, even though I’d tried not to let it. Not too much, at least.

That time, the only person who’d been close enough to see through my disguise had been Bea herself.

“Come on.” I lowered my hand from the small of her back and let my fingertips brush against the perfect curve of her ass—just for a second—before I took her hand in mine again. “Can’t keep our guests waiting, can we?”

“Like hell we can’t.” She stumbled after me as I drew her back down the aisle. Thankfully, she kept her voice low enough that the others wouldn’t be able to hear her. The last thing we wanted right now was to make a scene. “These aren’t *your* guests.”

I snorted.

She was right about that.

“But they’re yours,” I reminded her, grinning as I hoisted her hand triumphantly into the air, clutched in mine. I spoke to her through my smile. “You don’t want to embarrass yourself in front of them, do you?”

“Fucking try me,” she growled back, digging in her heels.

I only laughed.

God, she was exceptional. Every bit the spitfire she’d been when I’d first fallen for her.

I couldn’t have chosen a better woman for my bride.

And whether she liked it or not—now, she *was* my bride.

I knew better than to take her up on her offer.

Instead, I swept her off her feet and took her into my arms.

“Put me down!” she insisted through her teeth. Her breath against my neck was a gorgeous wash of humidity and warmth.

“Not on your life, darling.” I carried her the rest of the way down the aisle like a knight in shining armor. I was Lancelot, and she was my Guinevere. “Now, smile for the cameras.”

Bea turned her face just in time to see the photographer waiting for us at the end of the aisle. His vintage camera flashed, capturing us forever in that moment.

It was the first of many pictures for our wedding album. Later, when the photographer developed it, he’d probably be surprised to find how shocked Bea looked in the photo—

But he’d be even more surprised when he realized that based on this photo, and every other taken today, he’d somehow misremembered the color of Simon Roth’s hair and the wicked charm of Simon Roth’s smile.

For a moment, it might even occur to him that the man holding sweet Beatrice in his arms in these photos might not be Simon Roth at all—and

he'd be right.

WHILE THE GUESTS were guided off to their cocktail hour, Bea and I gathered with the wedding party and the families in the rose garden for more pictures. I kept her close to my side for all of them.

Now that she was mine, it wouldn't do to have her go wandering off. Or, for that matter, running away.

"What's wrong, darling?" I asked her in between shots. It was a dick move, sure—but while I was still pretending to be Simon, I was hardly pretending to be a saint. "You look unsettled."

"Gee," she snapped back at me quietly. With her family gathered all around us, I supposed she didn't want to risk raising her voice. "Wonder why?"

"Aren't you happy?" I paused and put my arm around her, fashioning my lips into a photogenic grin once more as the photographer counted down for another shot. I relaxed again after the camera had flashed. "It's your wedding day, after all."

"Oh, I'm *ecstatic*." As my hand wandered from her hip down to her ass, Bea grabbed my wrist and hauled my fingers back up into place. "Can't you tell?"

"I'm glad to hear it. As your husband, your happiness is paramount to me."

"That's so sweet of you, darling." Bea's eyes flicked up to meet mine for a moment. Her voice dropped to the breathiest of whispers. "Except that you're not my husband."

"No?"

"No," Bea said through a plastered-on smile. The camera flashed again. "You're a fucking faker."

"Am I?" I pulled back from her slightly to arch an eyebrow. "How so?"

"Some kind of technology, I suppose." Bea glowered at me for a moment, but already the photographer was snapping his fingers to demand more smiling. More staring into his bright, shiny lens. "Who are you working for, I wonder? One of Leviathan Financial's competitors?"

"No, but good guess." *I love the way your mind works*, I wanted to tell her, but it would have only sidetracked our current conversation. She'd always had such an imagination. Unfortunately, it was currently working

in the wrong direction. My disguise wasn't a thing of science fiction; it was far closer to fantasy. "It's strange, though."

"You wearing my fiancé's skin?" She snorted. "Finally, something you and I can agree on."

"No." My smile in the next photo was a smug one. "What I mean is, if you really cared about your so-called fiancé, you might have first asked me what I did with him."

Bea's lips fell open as she turned to me again. She looked surprised at herself for a moment. Then, her brows dropped back into a scowl. "I *do* care about him."

"Is that so?" As I recalled, she'd seen him as a bratty child who needed to be put in a good, long time-out. Which is exactly what I'd been more than happy to provide him with. "You really believe that?"

"It is, and I do," she insisted, but I wasn't buying it.

Partly because I knew her better than that.

Partly because she didn't even look convinced herself.

"If that was the case, then why did you go through with your vows?" I asked through another smile. Another photo. Another flash. "Why did you let me go through with mine? Why didn't you run?"

"I thought you were him," she snapped. "I didn't want to make a scene."

"Please, Bea. We both know that's not true. I know you saw me. The real me."

"I thought I was hallucinating. Now, I know better."

"Or, an even better question still—" I looked down at her and ran my thumb across her lower lip. Luscious and dangerously kissable. Just like every other part of her. "Why did you let me kiss you like you were my very own personal whore?"

The camera flashed again. I was eager to see how that photo in particular turned out.

I imagined it captured her perfectly. An exquisite mixture of furious, stunned, and gorgeously turned on.

"I told you. I thought you were him." Bea turned her face away from me. "As it turns out, I thought wrong."

I took her chin between my knuckle and my thumb and turned her face back up towards mine.

"Then you must love him *deeply*."

Bea frowned. “And why do you say that?”

“Because.” My smile was wicked again, and so was I. “If you didn’t, I can’t imagine any reason why you would have kissed me back quite like *that*.”

Bea stared up at me for a long moment, her brown eyes full of disparate things. Confusion. Shame. Anger. Lust—at the memory of how good that kiss had felt, maybe. Frustration. Confusion again.

I watched her cycle through each emotion until she finally settled on one.

Anger.

“I don’t know who you are, but you’re a fucking bastard,” she snarled up at me.

“Something else we can agree on,” I said with a smirk. “But remember, I may be a bastard, but you’re the one who married me.”

I could tell she wanted to slap me long before the photographer finally dismissed us from our photo session.

It was a show of immense personal strength, in my opinion, that she was able to wait until they were all gone before she finally drew her hand back and laid the smack across my cheek.

“I married Simon. Not you,” she spat, then turned and stormed off.

I rubbed my cheek and smiled, watching her walk away for a long moment before I followed after her.

Oh, yes. She was furious with me.

Good thing I liked her when she was angry.

Always had. Always would.

BEA

When I was younger, my mother told me love felt like being wrapped up in a nice cashmere shawl on a cold night.

My father had only ever shrugged.

Romance novels told me it would feel like the perfect kind of forever.

Love songs told me it was like Fridays or the rain on my skin.

How many times had I looked at Simon when we were younger and hoped to feel something like love? Hoped to feel something. *Anything*. Even the briefest flutter of butterflies in my stomach would've sufficed.

But no matter how long I'd looked at him for, no matter how hard I'd tried, I'd never felt anything like love for him.

Scratch that—I'd never felt anything like love at all.

Lust—that was another story. I'd had boyfriends, sure. Simon had dated around, too. It was part of our arrangement: we always knew we'd be married someday, but that didn't mean we needed to worry about saving ourselves for each other.

Not when I knew that sex with Simon was the last thing I'd ever want.

He'd only gotten handsy with me once, at a garden party when we were sixteen. I'd made it very clear to him then and there that while our impending marriage might have been a legal one, it was strictly for business.

He'd agreed.

When we were married, we'd have separate beds in separate bedrooms. Maybe even separate houses. Unless we were putting on a show for the wealthy clients of Leviathan Financial, we'd essentially have separate lives.

When I'd still believed in love, that had seemed a little sad. But once I finally gave up on the notion, it actually felt entirely ideal.

I would have my life. Simon would have his. The company our ancestors had built from the ground up would continue thriving, and all we'd have to do in exchange was make a few public appearances a year and wear our meaningless wedding rings.

It wouldn't have been anything resembling an earth-shattering romance—but it would have been fine.

It *should* have been fine.

But then, the mysterious dark-haired stranger had shown up at the opposite end of the aisle on our wedding day in Simon's place.

Every moment after that one, it felt like my entire world had been turned on its head.

"Are you running away from me, Bea?" As I stormed off, the man who wasn't Simon caught up with me easily. His legs were long and muscular; mine were hindered by my stupid Marilyn Monroe heels that sank into the grass every time I took a step.

"Trudging away," I corrected him. I clutched the skirt of my wedding dress in my fists and hiked it up so I could stomp off a little faster. "But essentially, yes."

"Don't you have questions for me? Things you'd like me to answer?" I'd had a head start on him, but now that he'd caught up with me, he didn't struggle to keep pace with my steps.

"Oh, I'm sure I do." I scowled, but not at him. No, I kept my gaze straight ahead. I didn't want to give him the satisfaction of so much as a glance. After that kiss he'd given me...I was pretty sure he'd had satisfaction enough for one day, thank you very much. "But I don't want to be anywhere near you right now."

"And why not?"

"Seriously?" The temptation to look at him was intense. Not just because he was gorgeous—every time I looked at him, it was becoming more and more likely that instead of Simon, I'd see *him*—but because he

was an excellent target to direct my fury at right now. I had to direct it to the grass in front of me instead.

“Seriously,” he echoed. “Your attraction to me is pretty obvious, Bea. Leaving my side...what’s the rush?”

“You’re not the man I was supposed to marry today,” I said through my teeth. “You’re dangerous.”

“Am I?”

“Very.” I finally lost my resolve. My heels sank deeper into the soft earth as I stopped in my tracks and wheeled around to face him. “You tricked me. Whoever you are. Believe it or not, most women don’t take kindly to being lied to. Especially by men wearing masks.”

“Is that what I’m wearing? A mask?” Before my very eyes, Simon’s face disappeared. Once more, I was glaring up at that handsome nose and dark hair. Gray eyes. Gorgeous smirk. He laughed as he saw me taking him in. “Better?”

I opened my mouth to answer him, but for a second, no sound came out. When I finally managed to shape words again, they burst from my lips in a brief, flustered stutter.

“I... I don’t...” I swallowed hard and set my jaw. “Not in the slightest.”

I turned to storm away from him again, but my heels caught in grass. I realized I was going to fall a second before I lost my balance—

But before I could, he caught me by my elbow and pulled my body against his.

“Careful, darling.” He purred the words down at me as he held me in his embrace. He smelled like leather and mint and a freshly lit match. Something smoking and smoldering, recently on fire. “Wouldn’t want you to ruin that pretty white dress of yours on the grass.”

“No?” I sneered up at him. God, his eyes were mesmerizing. I couldn’t look into them for too long without risking getting lost in the silver swirls through the grays of his irises. I focused my gaze on his stupid smirk instead. “You’ve already marred my entire wedding day. By comparison, what’s a little grass stain going to matter?”

“In that case...” He pulled me closer to him. Closer still. My breasts were pressed tight against the buttons of his tux jacket as he lowered his lips to my ear. “Why don’t I throw you down and take you right here? If

you're hell-bent on getting grass stains on your lovely white skirts, you might as well enjoy them."

Oh.

My heart was thrumming again. I could feel a blush rising up from between my tits and across my cheeks. The two flushes met in the middle at my collarbones.

This was wrong. All of it. From his handsome smirk to the way he looked in Simon's tux to the way he made my cunt spasm like an electric current was running through it, wild and uncontrolled.

In an instant, from my neckline to my eyebrows, my skin burned.

"If you're so horny, why don't you find a bathroom to go jerk off in." I composed myself with care. He already knew exactly how to get to me. I wasn't going to give him the satisfaction of giving into him on top of it. "It'll keep you busy while I alert security and call the police."

"As much as I like the idea of you putting me in handcuffs, Bea," he whispered back down at me, "You might find it in your heart to allow me to explain my actions first."

"And why would I do that?"

"Because..." he said. His gray eyes glinted wickedly. "If this marriage of yours was meant to secure the future of your family's company, I can't imagine anything that would ruin it quicker than calling the cops before the reception. Can you?"

I blinked several times as I considered it.

Fuck. I hated him.

But...

He did have a point.

"Fine," I snapped at him. "But I need to know who you are. Fast. And more importantly, I need to know what your game is. What you've done with Simon."

"So, you're finally concerned with what happened to this so-called fiancé you supposedly love so much." He chuckled as he dropped down on one knee.

"What are you doing?" For a second, it almost looked like he was about to pull out a ring and propose for himself—which would have been stupid, I supposed, since we'd just said our vows. But instead, he reached for my ankle.

Gently, he lifted my foot out of my heel. My skin burned in a whole new way at his touch.

"I'm not divulging my secrets out in the open here. And it's going to be hard for you to walk without snapping a bone in these shoes." He put the first heel aside, then moved to the next. His hand gripped my ankle, soft but firm. "Either I carry your heels, or I carry you. Which do you prefer?"

I swallowed. Hard.

As much as I'd balked at the way he'd swept me up into his arms when he'd whisked me down the aisle...

He had strong arms, whoever he was. Much stronger than Simon's, that was for sure.

"Have them, then." I turned my glare to the shoes. At least they were safe things to look angry at. "My feet won't miss them at all."

"No, I don't suppose they will," he agreed. He took my foot into his hand for a moment and rubbed his thumbs into the arch of it. It felt so good my eyes nearly rolled back with pleasure. Like if a massage was an orgasm. *Ridiculous*. "Your feet are too pretty to be in cages like these. I've always preferred you barefoot, anyway."

"Always?" I arched an eyebrow as a shock of worry shot through me. "Have you been stalking me too, then? For how long?"

"Longer than you imagine," he admitted. "But not stalking. Just... looking out for."

I scoffed. "Like a guardian angel?"

"No." He shook his head slowly, gray eyes glimmering darkly and sunshine catching the veins of silver that just barely streaked his dark hair. "Not quite. But—"

His gaze flicked away from me. They focused on a copse of trees at my back.

In an instant, he was on his feet again.

"Get behind me," he growled, stepping between me and the trees. "Now. If I tell you to run, you run. Don't look back."

"What are you talking about?" I peeked around his shoulder, trying to catch a glimpse of what had set him off. But all I could see were green leaves and branches. Nothing more. "What's happening?"

"Exactly what I'm trying to prevent." My new husband's shoulders tensed as he glowered at the trees. "There's something there. Something

demonic.”

“Why can’t I see it?”

“Because—” Abruptly, he swept an arm back to shove me roughly to the right. The air whistled sharply as I stumbled aside.

His hand moved quickly, snatching something out of the air. When he caught it, I saw that it was a long, sharp black knife made of something that looked like obsidian.

What the *fuck*.

“All right. Get out of here,” he growled. He shrugged the jacket of his tux off and let it drop to the grass, rolled up his sleeves—

Then launched himself toward the trees.

Simultaneously, something dark from the trees launched itself at him in return.

The thing was only a shadow, but it was shaped like a man. It was almost as tall as the man masquerading as Simon was. It moved just as fast as he did, too.

When Not-Simon collided with it, it proved to be more solid than it looked. He threw it to the ground with ease and pinned it beneath his knee.

“Your name,” he snarled down at it. “Tell me your name.”

“*Fuck you*,” the shadow hissed back. I didn’t know how. It certainly didn’t have a mouth, but its voice sounded haunted. It was a shiver of a sound. As it raised its hand, its fingers lengthened into long, sharp claws. It swiped at Not-Simon, but he drew back just in time to avoid its slash. “*I would rather die, King of Hell*.”

“Have it your way.” Not-Simon brought the knife he’d just caught down on the shadow. He plunged it into the thing’s chest over and over again.

The shadow screamed as the knife sank into it. Every time the blade entered the shadow’s body, it faded away a little more, until finally, there was no shadow beneath Not-Simon at all. Just a dark mark on the grass in the place where it had been, shaped like the body of a man.

It was only when the screams stopped that I realized I’d been frozen where I stood the entire time.

Not-Simon had told me to run, but the order had barely registered for me.

I guessed I’d already broken our vows. My legs were shaking, but I didn’t seem to be able to tear my eyes away.

The shadow wasn't the only thing worth staring at, as it turned out.

As my new husband had battled the thing, something about him had changed.

"Bea." Slowly, he turned his head toward me. Short, dark horns had risen from his temples. His eyes were entirely black. No more irises. No more whites. His shoulder heaved with every breath. He was panting like a beast.

He looked satanic.

Unhinged.

My heart was racing. I didn't know what I was looking at—except, in some distant part of my brain, for a moment, I thought I might.

Demon, something in my head whispered.

Maybe he really was.

"I told you to get out of here," he growled as he pushed himself back to his feet. "Why didn't you leave?"

I glanced down at his jacket and finally, I moved to pick it up off the ground.

"I didn't want to leave you alone with that thing," I said softly. My feet moved forward as I took a few steps closer to him, holding the jacket out like an offering. "Are you all right?"

He stooped to pick up my heels. His eyes were returning to Simon's blues. His horns disappeared as he reclaimed his disguise.

For a moment, it was so easy to pretend that I hadn't just witnessed anything out of the ordinary at all. He looked like Simon again. If I tried, I could almost imagine that the anger set in his brow was just the result of a wedding day temper tantrum. Nothing more.

But in my heart, I knew that it couldn't have been further from the truth.

Not-Simon snatched the jacket from my hand next and threw it over his shoulder. Then he took me by the elbow, marching me away from the site of the battle.

"The next time I tell you to run," he grunted, "you had better fucking obey."

BEA

With the soft grass under my feet and the man who wasn't my husband at my side, I found myself nearly dragged along in a retreat to my dressing room. The same one I'd had my hair and makeup done in back when I genuinely thought that today might go exactly according to plan.

"Thank you," I said softly as he closed the door behind us. "I...I guess I owe you one."

"You do," he agreed as he moved to the vanity. He dropped my heels onto it, placed the knife he'd taken from the shadow thing next to them, and tossed his jacket on the back of a chair. "You have no fucking idea."

"It would be easier to understand if I had some answers." I stood in the center of the room with my arms crossed over my ribs. "We're alone now, and I think I deserve an explanation. You can start talking any time."

"Well..." He turned to me and shrugged. "I'm not Simon Roth."

"Yeah, no shit." I'd known that the second I had kissed him.

I'd never kissed Simon, but sometimes, these were things you could tell just by looking at a man.

However Simon Roth kissed, it was certainly *nothing* like *that*.

"So, who *are* you, then?"

"Don't you recognize me?" He leaned back against the vanity and held out his arms, palms up. His Simon disguise fell away in an instant. Once again, I was standing in front of a dark-haired, ridiculously handsome,

incredibly dangerous-looking man with intense, gray eyes. “This is far from the first time we’ve met.”

“I meet a lot of people in my line of work.” That was true. Being the heiress to a banking empire didn’t exactly leave much room in my social calendar. “Though, I strongly suspect I wouldn’t forget a face like yours.”

“You like my face, do you?” He cocked his head to the side and stroked his jawline. He was still bristling with post-fight anger, but it was already beginning to fade.

Bastard. He knew *exactly* how good he looked—and when he was being all dark and dashing and cocky like this, he looked even better.

“Depends,” I said. “Is that even your real one, or just another disguise?”

“Oh, Bea. I’m all real.” He pushed off the vanity and drew himself up to his full height. He must have been at least six-three. Maybe taller. Tall enough, he was always looking down at me and I was always left looking up. “You can touch me to make sure, if you like.”

“What I’d like is answers.” Touching him was tempting, but it would only distract me, and I knew it. “You can start with your name.”

“That’s easy enough. They call me Apollyon. Destroyer. Emperor of the Abyss. King of Hell...” He took a few steps forward as he spoke. “Which do you prefer?”

“Which one is real?” He’d asked the shadow for its name. The fact that the shadow hadn’t wanted to give it to him told me something: there was probably power in the things people were called.

“They’re all real, darling,” he assured me. “But I usually go by Abaddon. Don, if you like.”

“Don.” If I ignored the rest of the stuff he’d just said, I could accept *Don* as normal enough. “And where did we first meet, *Don*? Like I said, I highly doubt I would have forgotten you.”

“I do have a way of making an impression on people,” he agreed. “But if I told you, you wouldn’t believe me.”

“Try me.” After the business with that shadow, he might be surprised with how much I could believe now.

“I’d love to,” he purred in a tone that made my clit throb. “But I’m afraid that will have to wait until later. You don’t remember me for a reason, Bea. Unfortunately, the memory of our first meeting was taken from you. Along with so many others. A shame, really. Some of them were

particularly..." He rolled his lower lip beneath his tongue as his eyes raked up and down my body. "Inspiring."

My breath caught in my throat. He was only a few feet away from me now.

Any closer, and I was going to be able to imagine *exactly* how inspiring a man who looked like him could really be.

"And why did I lose my memories?" I asked.

"To keep you safe, of course. Some of them contained things that you were better off not recalling." He reached for my arm and trailed his fingertips down my bicep. The look in his eyes was almost wistful. "Particularly the ones involving me."

"Is that why we were attacked? Because you're dangerous for me?" I kept my gaze as steely as I could.

It was difficult, with the way Don was looking down at me. There was something in his eyes that made it far too easy to imagine what kind of moments I might have forgotten.

"Some dangers are more pressing than others." His eyes met mine. "I may be dangerous for you, Bea, but you saw the shade I just killed. What do you think would have happened if I hadn't been there to stop it?"

"A shade," I whispered, glancing at the knife on the vanity. "Is that what that was?"

"It was an assassin, yes. A thing forged from darkness in the shape of the demon that controlled it."

There was that word again. *Demon*.

"Is that what you are, then? A demon?"

"Of course I am," he said, like that was a completely sane thing to say to a woman. "What else would I be?"

I couldn't help it. I laughed.

"*Demons*," I repeated. "That's ridiculous."

It wasn't.

Given everything else I'd just witnessed, it made about as much sense as anything else did right now.

"I told you that you wouldn't believe me," Don reminded me. "But whether you like it or not, it's true. I'm a demon. I was born in the pits of Hell and now, along with two others, I rule there as king."

"You're the Devil, then," I said, blinking. I hadn't ever been that good of a Catholic, but I at least knew a thing or two about who was who. "Satan

—Lucifer. He's the king of Hell."

"He was. Not anymore."

"All right then, *Don*—if that *is* your real name—"

"Real as everything else."

I brought my eyes up to his again. "Why do *demons* want to kill me, then? I've seen *The Exorcist*, you know. *Paranormal Activity*—all six of them. Killing random humans isn't really the MO of you demonic types. Aren't you supposed to try and possess me instead?"

"Haven't you been paying attention? I already possess you. You married me. I own you now. Mind, body...soul." Don brushed my hair behind my ear and dragged his thumb across my cheek. "Though, we're going to have to work on your obedience. I'm not surprised, of course—you were always exceptionally strong-willed—but still."

I drew in a breath.

I didn't like the idea of obeying men at all. Normally, at least.

But Don was something else.

Looking the way he did...

He might be exactly the kind of man I'd like to obey.

"You only answered one of my questions," I pointed out. "Why does a demon want me dead?"

"Humans have communed with demons for as long as man has walked the Earth." Don's gaze dropped to the swells of my breasts for a moment. "Woman, too, for that matter. Scholars, writers, poets..." His eyes trailed back up my neck until he was staring into my irises again. "And especially bankers. Money is the root of all evil, you know."

"That's not an answer, Don."

"It's part of one." His gaze turned serious. "Simon. He's responsible."

"My fiancé Simon?"

"Your ex-fiancé, yes. I overheard him in the garden earlier making a deal with something from Hell. He asked it to kill you, and it agreed."

"And you're sure it was actually...*him*?" I'd always known Simon was kind of a prick but until just now, I'd been operating under the assumption that we were...maybe not *friends*, but something close. I certainly hadn't anticipated that he'd want to take a hit out on me. Frankly, I was a little surprised that he'd had the balls to even consider it. "But... Why?"

"Something about not being able to control you, I think he mentioned." Don shrugged. "But it could just as easily be a money thing. Most deals

with demons are.”

Money. Control. Those *were* things that Simon had always been interested in.

The realization that it had nearly cost me my life hit me like a softball to the chest.

“So...you overheard a stranger making a deal with a demon to kill someone and you...what? Decided to start wearing his skin for the hell of it?”

“No,” Don said firmly. “I overheard an ungrateful little shit making a deal with a demon to kill *you* and I decided that I couldn’t let that happen. Putting a glamor on to make me look like Simon was just the easiest way to keep you safe.”

“By tricking me into marrying you?” I wasn’t sure how that kept me *safe*, exactly—though, even with barely knowing Don, I knew that I definitely preferred being his wife over being Simon’s.

Even if Simon hadn’t been trying to kill me, I suspected that might still be the case.

“Marrying you was the quickest way to bind you to me,” Don explained. “The bond between a husband and a wife isn’t easily broken. All the better to keep you safe.”

“I see.” I guessed that made sense, and after having a demonic knife thrown at my head, I didn’t *hate* the idea of Don keeping me safe. “And when you’re not masquerading around in a human suit...is this your real form? Or are you more like...” I bit my lip, recalling Don’s black eyes and black horns. “Like you were after you got done killing that thing.”

“A bit of both,” Don admitted. “Why? Did it scare you, seeing me like that?”

“A little.” It had been the strangest mix of terrifying and, well... kind of hot. “But I’m also...interested, I guess.”

“Interested?” Don arched an eyebrow. “Would you like to see more?”

I held my breath for a moment, then nodded.

“Yes,” I said. “I think I might.”

“Promise you won’t panic?” Don asked. “I can show you, but sometimes these things are difficult for humans to comprehend. What you saw earlier was only a small taste.”

“Anything you show me, I can handle.” I’d already seen his black eyes and horns. What was the worst he could do next? Sprout hooves? Spin his

head around and spit pea soup? Run around with a pitchfork and start poking sinners in the butt with it? “I’m not exactly the swooning type.”

His lips shifted into a crooked smile. “That’s true. You never were.”

He glanced down, and I followed the line of his gaze.

He’d turned his hand over.

Sitting in his palm was a ball of bright, flickering flame.

I moved my fingers toward it but had to stop before I touched the fire. The air around it shimmered with a heat that intensified the closer I got to touching it. Definitely real.

“It’s hellfire,” he explained. “I can use it to hurt people who want to hurt you. Or, if I need, I can use it to speak with the other kings of Hell.”

I blinked at the flames as he folded them back into his hand. Smoke rose up through his fingers as he made the fire disappear.

He was right. This *was* a little hard to comprehend.

“What else can you do?” I asked, curious.

Don laughed. “Greedy thing, aren’t you?”

“Maybe I’m just trying to get a better sense of who my new husband really is.”

There. I’d said it. Out loud, so Don could hear.

I’d said my vows to him. I’d kissed him at the altar. And in turn, he’d protected me. He’d saved my life.

Already, he felt more like my husband than Simon ever had.

At least Don didn’t want me dead.

“All right,” Don said. He took a step back and rolled his shoulders. He cracked his neck. “How’s this?”

His body tensed. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw something dark and glossy rise from behind him.

I blinked, and suddenly, it wasn’t just in the corner of my eye anymore.

Sleek black feathers. Broad, massive wings. His horns were back again, dark and even longer than they’d been the first time I saw them. Both curved up and tapered into dangerously sharp points.

Once again, his eyes were all black.

This was no trick. It couldn’t be. There was no way.

Any part of me that had continued to doubt Don’s story a moment ago was a true believer now.

My husband was a demon. I was the bride of a king of Hell.

What the fuck had I gotten myself into?

And why the fuck was I not more afraid?

“You’re real.” I took a step toward him, reaching out to brush my fingers against the feathers of his wings. “Aren’t you?”

“You already know the answer to that, Bea.” His wings flexed as I touched them. The feathers were almost metallic to the touch and strangely cold compared to the heat radiating from Don’s skin. “And if you like that—”

Don paused as a knock sounded at the door. A second later, the door began to open.

My heart jumped up in my throat as Don’s wings folded back and vanished. He grabbed me quickly, wrapped me up in his arms, and placed a passionate kiss on my lips. Against my mouth, I could feel him shifting back into his Simon disguise—and not a moment too soon, either.

“Um...Bea?” Ava’s voice sounded from the doorway. She cleared her throat uncomfortably at the sight of me in Simon’s arms. Behind her, Joan’s brow was fixed in a glare at Simon—no. *Don*.

“We thought you might need a quick touch-up before you and the *hubby* do your big entrance at the reception.” Joan said. Her voice was ice cold and sharp as a butcher’s knife. “He’s not bothering you, is he?”

“No,” I said quickly, pushing Don away. “We’re fine. Totally fine. A touch-up would be great.”

“I’ll go.” Don tucked his hands into his pockets and gave me a wink as he moved toward the door. He nodded at Ava and Joan as he passed them. “Good seeing you ladies again.”

“Again?” Ava whispered as he left. “I think I’ve maybe met Simon twice in my entire life...”

“Uh. Yeah. About that.” I let out a breath. “I’ve got something to tell you two.”

“Yeah?” Joan arched an eyebrow and headed to the vanity. “Well, seeing as we walked in on you two smooching—which I *know* you’re not into... Start talking. We’re all ears.”

DON

I summoned hellfire in my hand again as I left Bea to speak with her friends.

Maybe she'd tell them about me.

Maybe, she didn't dare.

Either way, I didn't begrudge her a moment with Joan and Ava. They didn't know it yet, but they were both just as tied up in the affairs of Heaven and Hell as she was.

Their memories had been taken too.

Besides—I had my own friends that I had to speak with now.

“Malacoda,” I whispered into the fire in my palm. “Moloch. I need you on Earth. Come find me. Something's wrong.”

I wandered out to the terrace. Below it, the wedding guests were still having cocktails on the lawn.

Mal and Lock didn't keep me waiting there for long.

“That you, Abaddon?” The scent of gunpowder, black coffee, and crackling firewood wafted around me as Mal swaggered up to my side. “Hardly recognize you in that get-up.”

“That's a fancy human suit ye've got there, lad.” Lock clapped me on the shoulder as he appeared on my other side. His presence added the scent of whiskey and heather to the mix. “What's the occasion?”

“Just got married.” I held up my hand so they could both see the ring on my finger.

“Shit!” Mal swore. “Seriously?”

“And ye didn’t even think tae invite us?” Lock scoffed. “Bit rude, eh?”

“It was a spur-of-the-moment decision,” I admitted. “No time to send out Save the Dates.”

“So, who’s the lucky little lady?” Mal asked.

“That’s what I’m wondering.” Lock squinted as he surveyed the crowd below. “I thought we all agreed with the angels that we weren’t going to rollin’ about with human lassies anymore. Unless you’ve heard otherwise from Heaven?”

“It’s not Heaven I’m worried about right now,” I said with a sigh. “It’s Hell.”

“Aye, well. We’re kings of Hell now, are we not?” Lock pointed out. “If there’s trouble brewin’ in our domain, ye’d think Mal and I might’ve heard of it by now.”

“I’m not so sure anymore.” I shook my head. “This is Bea’s wedding. Or, it was supposed to be. I guess it still is. Just, I made the executive decision to take the place of her groom.”

“Don...” Mal growled in warning. “That’s a dangerous game to be playin’ and you know it.”

“Ye wee little shite.” Lock smacked the back of my head. “Did ye not *hear* the angels when we cut that deal? No more humans wrapped up in our affairs. Ye were there yerself when they took the lass’s memories away, fuck’s sake!”

I gave them both a glare. “Do you really think I would have done it if I didn’t have to? She’s in danger. I had no choice.”

“You fuckin’ bet she’s in danger.” Mal returned my glare with one of his own. “You put her there the second you went and married the poor gal, ya bastard!”

“No. I married her *because* she’s in danger.” Quickly, I explained what I’d heard in the rose garden before I’d made my decision to step into Bea’s husband’s shoes. The voice of a demon in the rose garden. The conversation he’d had with Simon. The plot they were hatching to get rid of her. For good. “They wanted to kill her. I couldn’t let that happen.”

“And you’re sure?” Mal asked. “This Simon fella has some kind of demonic ties to him?”

“I’m certain. Without a doubt.” That other voice I’d heard had been familiar. I just didn’t know why yet. “Simon didn’t like that he wouldn’t

be able to control her. He made a pact with something dark and hellish to ensure that she'd be out of the picture. Permanently. Already, I had to kill a shade that attacked her. If you don't believe me, I'll go fetch the knife I took off of it."

"Fuck," Lock swore. "Well...I can see why ye felt the need to step in then, aye. What'd you do with her beau, though?"

"You got him hog-tied around here somewhere?" Mal craned his neck like he was looking for someone bound and gagged in the crowd.

"I laid him out, opened up the Abyss, and pushed him in," I said simply. It had hardly been the most elegant of choices, but in the moment, it was the best I'd been able to manage. "It's not a good idea to let him wander around there on his own for long, though. Whatever demon Simon was conspiring with, he implied that Simon's father might not be quite as human as he appears as well."

"Right." Mal nodded. "We'll want to take care of that, then."

"And quick-like, aye." Lock patted me on the back. "Open your realm up for us, then. We'll slip in, track him down, push him in the Pit. That should hold him, don't ye think?"

"That'll do," I agreed. "I'd appreciate it."

"Then I suppose we'll want to go questioning him," Lock continued. "Figure out who he's working with—and who this father of his really is."

"I'd appreciate that, too." I gave Lock and Mal each a tense smile. "But the interrogation will have to wait, if you don't mind."

Mal snorted. "S'pose so. Looks like you've got hands full here now."

"Ye'll look after the lasses while we're gone?" Lock asked. There was a glint of urgency in his eyes. I knew exactly why.

Once upon a time before her memory was taken, Bea's friend Joan had stolen Lock's heart like a thief in the night. Mal and Ava had been madly in love as well.

Three human women. Three kings of Hell.

Three relationships that were supposed to have ended to ensure that the world stayed in balance.

And the moment that I'd decided to make Bea my bride, I'd gone and ruined it all.

I hadn't had any other choice.

"I'll look after them," I promised. "We'll deal with Simon tomorrow and get a better idea of what we're facing here." I straightened the lapels

of my tux and forced my lips into a confident smirk. “Until then...looks like I have a wedding reception to attend.”

And a beautiful bride to attend it with, too.

BEA

“O kay, *what the fuck was that?*” Joan perched on the counter of the vanity and cut right to the chase. “Because what it looked like was you making out with *Simon*—which I know good and well you’d never do.”

“Not if you were in your right mind, anyway,” Ava added with a wince. She touched the back of her hand to my forehead. “Are you feeling okay, Bea? Are you like...drunk, or something?”

“I’m not drunk,” I promised her. “And I’m feeling...okay. I guess. I think.”

“After the way you kissed Simon? Obviously, you’re not.” Joan crossed her arms and gave me a maverick’s stare. “Who are you and what have you done with our Bea?”

“I’m not the one you should be asking that.” I sighed. How the hell was I going to explain this to them? Every option sounded crazier than the last—which meant I was just going to have to settle for the truth. “The man that I just married... That wasn’t Simon.”

“Does he have a less dickish twin brother that we didn’t know about?” Ava asked. “A clone, maybe?”

“It sure looked like him,” Joan agreed.

“Not a twin. And not a clone.” I sighed again. “He says he’s a demon.”

“Simon? A *demon*?” Ava’s eyes went wide as she blinked several times.

"I'd buy it," Joan scoffed. "I *did* see him make a pass at a cocktail waitress during the rehearsal dinner last night, you know. But that doesn't explain why you were making out with him just now."

"No—that was Simon hitting on the waitress," I said with a sigh. "But from the moment I walked down the aisle onward... He hasn't been Simon at all. He's a demon, and I don't mean that metaphorically."

Ava and Joan stared at me for a long moment without saying anything. They thought I'd lost my mind.

I wasn't entirely sure that they were wrong.

But instead of calling me crazy—which I was pretty sure they had every right to—they just looked at each other and shrugged.

"Okay. So he's a demon, then." Ava was the first to speak. Her brow furrowed with focused seriousness. "To interfere with a wedding like this, he must be a pretty powerful one. Usually they steer clear of those."

"Usually?" I blinked. "What do you mean, *usually*?"

"She means they don't like hanging out in places full of ringing church bells and happy tears and declarations of love," Joan explained. "But then again, I guess you and Simon were never really—"

"How do you two know so much about *demons*? You're both taking this...surprisingly well," I pointed out. Better than they'd taken the sight of me making out with a man they thought was Simon, at any rate.

"My mom's told me about them, mostly," said Ava. "You know how she is—all crystals and horoscopes and moon phases. She knows all sorts of stuff about this kind of thing."

"Uh-huh." Slowly, I nodded. I guessed Ava did have a point. Just looking at Ava's mom, you'd never be able to tell she was into all of that witchy nonsense. But every time I'd visited Ava back in college, I hadn't managed to escape without having my palm looked at and my tea leaves read. It checked out. But historically speaking, Joan was always a little more of a skeptic. Or she had been, once upon a time. I turned my gaze to her. "And you?"

"I watch a lot of horror movies. Read a lot of spooky books." Joan lifted a shoulder lazily. "As for trusting you... Call it gut instinct, I guess." She rubbed the back of her neck and sighed. "It sounds...plausible, somehow. Don't ask me why. Like something out of a dream that I forgot the plot of as soon as I woke up."

“What does he want with you, though?” Ava asked, looking worried again. “To hurt you, do you think?”

“I think he wants to protect me, actually.” I pursed my lips. “A shadow-thing attacked me just a little bit ago. He killed it. He can make fire appear in his hand. He showed me his wings. And when I walked down the aisle—when he kissed me... he didn’t look like Simon at all. He looked like...” I fanned myself with my hand, suddenly feeling incredibly warm. “Like if Don Draper from *Mad Men* and Gerard Butler had a lovechild.”

“Weird,” said Ava. She wasn’t wrong.

“Hot,” said Joan. She wasn’t wrong either. Not even a little bit. “But... okay. Let me play devil’s advocate for just one sec. Are you sure that Simon didn’t just...drug you, or something? Slip something in your champagne so maybe you wouldn’t realize what a horrible husband he’d be and pull a *Runaway Bride* before he could tie you to him for life? I’m okay with you macking on a demon, Bea, but if this is just some kind of trick Simon is playing on you—”

“I don’t feel like I’ve been drugged.” I imagined if I did, all of this would make a lot more sense. But the fact of the matter was...

I’d seen things today that defied all normal logic and reason.

All of this felt incredibly real.

“If he’s not Simon, who *is* he, then?” Ava furrowed her brow. “Did you get his name? In those demon possession movies, the priest always tries to get the demon’s name.”

“I’ve always wanted to try my hand at an exorcism.” Joan stroked her chin. “You think he’d let you tie him to a bed while I go rustle up some holy water and a crucifix?”

“We’re *not* exorcising him,” I told Joan sternly. “He says his name is Abaddon. Don, for short. He says we’ve, ah...met. Before. But my memories were taken. Or something.” I started pacing. “I don’t know. I’m still trying to wrap my head around it all myself, truth be told.”

“Then you *know* how suspicious that sounds,” Joan pointed out. “Hey, Bea, I’m a magical demon hottie! Don’t worry about the way I’m wearing your husband’s skin—you know me! You just don’t remember, because, like, *amnesia and shit!*”

“It *is* kind of suspicious,” Ava agreed. “Demons work in lies, Bea. That’s kind of their entire thing, you know? Simon might not be tricking

you, but this...this *entity* might be.”

I cringed. “Are you going to call me crazy if I tell you that I...kind of trust him?”

I did. I knew it was insane, but there was something between Don and me that I couldn’t quite put my finger on. Every time I tried to grab hold of it, it slipped away through my fingers. Like trying to snatch a stream of water or make a rope out of sand.

I felt it every time he touched me and every time we kissed.

“Oh, honey.” Joan shook her head. “You’ve got it bad, don’t you?”

“If he’s as hot as you say he is...” Ava shrugged. “We’d call you crazy for wanting to bang Simon. Not some infernal hot guy. Simon’s not bad looking, of course, but if this demon guy is some kind of succubus sex god...”

“We haven’t fucked,” I promised them. “I’m not *that* stupid.”

“You mean you haven’t fucked *yet*,” Joan corrected me.

A blush was rising to my cheeks.

They had a point. They knew me well.

Being essentially engaged to a man I didn’t want to marry from the time I was born hadn’t exactly led me to make the most...*intelligent* decisions about boyfriends in the past.

But at least when I made bad decisions, they always looked good at the time.

“He says I’m in danger. More demon shit,” I explained. “He says that Simon’s responsible. That Simon made a deal with something from Hell, and now...I’ve essentially got some kind of satanic price on my head.”

“And where *is* Simon?” Joan asked.

I blinked. “Um...”

Ava snorted. “Bea! You didn’t even ask, did you?”

“I tried!” I threw my arms out in frustration. “I’m kind of dealing with a lot right now, thanks.”

Which was true. But just as true was the fact that, all things considered...

Simon had always been kind of an asshole.

If he’d made some kind of deal with the Devil that put me in danger... was I really supposed to care?

“Look, we get it. This *is* a lot.” Joan grabbed my lipstick from the vanity and brought it over to me. She held my face steady with one hand

while she applied it to my lips with the other. “If even part of what this Don creature has told you is true, then you’re right not to worry about that weird little fucker you were supposed to call a husband.”

“But if it’s a lie...” Ava hugged herself as her voice trailed off. Her eyes were full of concern.

“Something weird is definitely going on,” Joan said as she capped my lipstick again. “But until we find out what that is... We just don’t want you to get hurt, Bea.”

“I don’t want me to get hurt either.” I pressed my lips together to help set the lipstick and resisted the urge to run my tongue between them. I was nervous. Maybe even afraid. With Don around, it had been hard to tell exactly *what* I felt. “Or the two of you, for that matter. I don’t know what other evil shit might be lurking around this wedding now.”

“We’ll be fine.” Joan’s eyes glinted with promise. “I don’t remember if you recall, but I *do* know three different martial arts. If any demons crashing your reception tonight try to fuck with us, I’ll kick their asses straight back to hell. This so-called husband of yours included, if he doesn’t stay in line.”

“If he isn’t Simon, are you actually even married to him at all?” Ava asked.

I considered it for a moment.

She had a good point, but in my heart, I already knew my answer.

He was.

“I *feel* married to him. If that makes sense,” I said after a long pause. “It feels... like fate, or something.”

“That’s sweet, darling,” Don said from the doorway. He looked like Simon again. From his blond hair to his blue eyes to his broad-but-could-be-broader chest. But even though he looked like Simon, his words and his attitude and the suave way he leaned against the doorframe—those were undeniably all Don. “I feel exactly the same way.”

“Well. Speak of the devil,” Joan quipped. Her eyes narrowed as she looked Don over. “What fiendish things are you up to, I wonder?”

“Joan,” Ava hissed, but Don seemed more amused than angered by Joan’s words.

“Just thought it might be time for me and my blushing bride to make our grand entrance to the reception,” Don said. “If she’s ready, that is.”

“Do you want us to stay with you?” Ava asked me quietly.

“Maybe we should work this guy over for some information first,” Joan suggested, cracking her knuckles. “Find out what’s really going on here.”

“I’m fine,” I promised them. “I’ll see you on the dance floor. Okay?”

Joan and Ava both hugged me before they left. As Joan headed past Don, she gave him a look of blatant dislike. Ava glanced up at him in suspicion, but quickly turned away.

As for me...

I went and got my shoes.

Don was right.

If we were going to keep up this charade, we’d need to go face the guests eventually.

Part of me still wondered why I was even keeping it up at all.

“Wait,” Don said as I moved to slip my feet back into my heels.

“Why?” I knitted my brow together. “I can’t exactly go back downstairs barefoot.”

“No, you can’t.” Don crossed toward me and took the shoes from my hands. “But I can at least make them more comfortable for you before we go.”

I gasped as flame appeared beneath his palm again.

“Don! You can’t just set my fucking shoes on fire! Those are vintage! They’re *priceless!*” I dove for the heels in desperation—how the fuck was immolating my shoes going to make them more comfortable?—but Don pulled them up out of my reach.

“I’m not setting them on fire.” He ran the flame in his palm over the pair of heels quickly. To my relief, they didn’t go up in smoke. “Demons invented high heels, you know. Making them wearable is the least I can do to atone for it. Besides...” He smiled down at me as he handed the heels back over. “You’ve got pretty feet. It would be a shame to leave them aching all night.”

I swallowed hard as I placed the heels back on the floor.

Right. *That* was why I hadn’t called security on Don.

It wasn’t the ache in my feet that I was worried about.

Every time he looked at me—every time he was even in the same *room* as me—there was a much more present ache in my body. It was settled right between my thighs, and it was almost impossible to ignore.

I might have still been in some kind of demonic danger, too. It still sounded crazy, and I knew it...

But I couldn't rule it out. Not entirely.

Not now that I'd seen fire appear in Don's hands and wings spring from his back.

When I slipped my feet back into the heels, it made his story even more convincing.

Just like he'd promised—they were actually comfortable now.

If that wasn't proof of some kind of magic going on here, I didn't know what was.

But I needed more than proof. I needed answers. Real ones.

And to get those, I needed more time with Don.

Preferably, alone.

"Are you ready, my bride?" Don offered me his arm and a charming, lopsided smile.

I took a deep breath, then took his arm in my hand.

"I guess I don't have much of a choice."

BEA

We walked into the reception hall like we owned the place.
I guessed, technically, we kind of did.

Only—that wasn't true. The wedding was being held on my parents' estate, yes. And when my parents died—hopefully a very long time from now—Simon and I were supposed to inherit it. Just like we would inherit all of Simon's father's property when he passed on as well. We'd been the joint benefactors of our parents' wills since birth. Not just me. Not just him. Simon and me, together.

Except that I hadn't married Simon today.

Even if it looked like I had.

"How does it feel?" Don purred down into my ear. He folded his hand over my fingers, which were curled around his arm. His smile was dangerously contagious.

But my smile was as fake as the disguise Don wore.

"Like we're lying through our teeth," I said through my forced grin and my straight, white teeth. "Every moment that passes, I hate more than the last."

The string quartet in the garden was playing Clarke's "Trumpet Voluntary." With the flowers and sparkling wine glasses and soft glow of the candlelight, it felt like we were royalty greeting our subjects for the first time.

This was also almost true.

I was the future queen of the Leviathan Financial empire.

And if Don was to be believed—I certainly bought it, even if Ava and Joan were still on the fence—he was a king of Hell.

Given some of Leviathan's current corporate practices, those two things seemed like they could have a lot of overlap at times.

Some demons, like Don, could summon fire from their hands and wore hidden wings on their backs.

Some, like my father and Levi Roth, my new would-be father-in-law, controlled unfathomable amounts of money and dressed in Armani suits.

"Let me know when you hit rock bottom on hating things, then." Don patted my hand, then raised his palm in a brief wave of acknowledgment to our applauding guests.

"What? So you can break through bedrock and drag me back to Hell with you?" I waved to everyone as well. Like a beauty queen with a bomb hidden in her crown.

"Just thought it might be a nice place to consummate our marriage," Don said through his own smile. "When I make our bed rock later tonight, I'd like it to be on solid ground."

"If you wanted solid ground between us, you probably shouldn't have tricked me into marrying you in the first place." I chose to ignore the comment about consummating our marriage.

Was Don charming, clever, and smoking hot? Sure. If he was even half as good at sex as he was at kissing, he was probably a great lay, too. I'd give him that.

But there was a difference between being in business with devils and rolling into bed with one.

That's what I was telling myself, anyway.

It helped me keep my mind off of how badly I wanted to do exactly that: get Don into bed and never leave it again.

"The foundations of our union might be shaky, Bea. But I don't think your trust in me is," Don said with a dark chuckle. His breath was humid against my ear as he dipped down to whisper in it. "Just imagine the other parts of you that I could make tremble. Knees, lips..."

"Don," I growled at him in warning.

"And I can assure you, darling—" He winked down at me. "—as soon as I get you alone, I think you'll discover at least one thing between us that's *very* firm."

I swallowed hard as the thought of Don's cock crossed my mind.

I focused my eyes straight ahead and said nothing in return.

By the time we reached the head table, my pussy was throbbing again.

Don might have been a demonic scoundrel, but he certainly had a way with words.

Our table was perched up on a pedestal. On top of a white linen tablecloth lit by flickering candlelight, there were dinner settings laid out for two.

As we stepped up onto it, Don grabbed my hand. He raised it to his mouth before I could pull it away.

Don's lips seared against my knuckles in a triumphant kiss. When he broke it, he hoisted my hand into the air to the roaring approval and applause of the crowd.

A blush rose to my cheeks immediately. I stared up at him in a sort of awe.

"What?" he asked, smirking down at me. "Something wrong?"

"You're showboating, Don."

"Maybe. But it's hardly a sin for a man to show off his new bride."

"Pride isn't a sin anymore?" I arched an eyebrow at him. *God*, he was good-looking. It was almost unfair. "I hadn't heard."

"There are more interesting sins I think you and I should be considering right now." Don pulled my chair out for me and I slipped into it. His hands curled around my shoulders as he dipped down to whisper into my ear again. "And of all the sins I'm guilty of tonight, pride is the least of them."

A word, unspoken, rose up in my mind like the bubbles of the champagne a waiter poured into our glasses.

Don was right. He really could make my knees shake. I drew in a long, slow breath to try to steady them while he slipped into the chair at my side.

"I know I'm yours now." I whispered to him once the waiter was gone. "But certain other concerned parties aren't going to agree. Like Simon's father, for instance. And mine. How long do you expect you'll actually be able to keep this up for?"

"I can usually keep it up for several hours, if you think you can handle that." Don placed my glass of champagne in my hand and clinked his glass against it.

“You may have married me, but you aren’t Simon,” I reminded him. I tried not to imagine what a few hours in bed with Don might be like—and failed. “What’s your plan, exactly? You’ll spend the rest of our lives disguised as him?”

“Would you rather I changed back to my true form?”

I nearly choked on my champagne. I’d taken a sip at *exactly* the wrong time.

“No,” I sputtered. I had to clear my throat to compose myself. “I don’t think that’s a good idea at all.”

It was hard enough to control myself around Don when he was sitting here looking like the man who’d put a hit out on me.

If Don decided to regain his actual looks, I was pretty sure that any sense of control I had left in me was going right out the door—and straight into bed.

“Oh, Bea.” Don shook his head slowly, staring deeply into my eyes. Every time he looked at me like that, it felt like he was looking right into my soul. “You’re not going to be able to deny me forever, you know. Face it—we both know there’s not a single part of you right now that would prefer to have Simon here instead of me. You were made for me. Only me. Surely you can feel it too.”

I scowled at him.

I didn’t want to admit it, but he was right.

If Simon had been here, he would have been complaining about being forced to wear a tux and making fun of my Great-aunt Gertrude’s skin-tight leopard print gown by now.

Don, on the other hand, smiled as Gerty waved at us over the crowd.

“She looks stunning in that dress, don’t you think?” Don raised his hand to give a small wave back to her. “It suits her. Whoever she is.”

“That’s my Great-Aunt Gertrude.” I paused for a second, wondering why I was telling Don any of this at all. “But she’s pushing eighty. You don’t think it’s a little...*gauche* on a woman of her age?”

“I think it’s fantastic,” Don said genuinely. “Don’t you?”

I couldn’t help but smile. Just a little bit. Genuinely as well. “I do, actually. She’s always been a free spirit like that. I used to spend summers at her villa in Italy when I was a little girl, you know. She taught me how to put on lipstick and gave me my first sip of wine.”

Those summers in Italy were some of my favorite memories as a child, in fact. I'd eaten my weight in pasta, fallen asleep reading books in vineyards, and been blissfully free of playdates with Simon for months at a time.

"She taught you well." Don cupped my cheek to turn my face toward him. His thumb lingered around the edges of my lower lip, tracing its shape. "Promise me something?"

"It depends," I told him. "What do you want?"

"When we're that age, promise you'll still wear things that tight. And that low-cut, for that matter."

"You're assuming that I'm going to let you live to see morning, given the mess you've made of tonight," I warned him.

But Don only laughed.

He knew exactly what an empty threat that was.

"If you want to kill me, darling, you're more than welcome to try. But do me a favor and wait until after dinner, will you?" Don nodded to the waiter who was coming toward us with two plates of filet mignon. His gaze didn't leave me for long, though. When his eyes met mine again, they were gorgeously gray again. Don's eyes, not Simon's. "I'm *starving*."

With that look in his eyes, I suspected he wasn't talking about the steak at all.

We got through dinner without any issues—except that I couldn't talk to him at all without him saying something that made my breath catch in my chest and my cunt ache. Every question I asked, he turned into yet another innuendo.

I supposed if Don was really a demon, it shouldn't have surprised me that he was a horny devil on top of it.

But by the time the wedding band took their places and called us down for our first dance, it was hard to say whether I was more turned on or annoyed.

"You're going to have to talk to me about something other than sex eventually, you know," I told him as we moved to the dance, floor, hand in hand.

"And I will in the morning," he promised. "But for tonight—it wouldn't hurt if you tried to enjoy yourself, you know."

"Oh, darling." I mimicked the same tone Don used when he purred those words at me. "Doesn't it look like I'm trying?"

“I’m surprised you have to try, frankly.” Don placed a hand on my waist and pulled my body close to his. If he wanted me any closer, we’d have to take off our clothes. “After all—they’re playing our song.”

I closed my eyes and sighed. I didn’t know much about Don still, but if Don and I had a song, I highly doubted it would be anything by the Police. Specifically, “Every Breath You Take”—the song Simon had chosen for our first dance. Don’t get me wrong—I didn’t have anything against Sting. But those lyrics about how he’d always be watching me? More creepy than romantic, if you asked me.

So, imagine my surprise when the band started playing Frank Sinatra instead.

“Is this... ‘Strangers in the Night’?” My eyes popped open in surprise. My body was already moving with Don’s in an elegant, effortless waltz. Every time Simon and I had practiced this dance, he’d stepped on my feet so many times I usually had to ice them after. But with Don, it was instinctual. Effortless. Like we already knew each other’s moves.

“It is,” Don admitted, holding me close. “Your favorite, isn’t it? I thought it suited us well.”

“It is my favorite. And it does suit us,” I said slowly in return. It was perfect, actually. And—apart from the fact that Don was a demon who’d replaced the man who was actually supposed to become my husband today—in so many ways, so was he. “But...how did you know?”

“Like I told you. I’ve known you for a long time. Quite well, truth be told.” The guests all gasped as Don swept me off my feet and spun me around like I weighed nothing at all. They must have been terrified. If it had been Simon pulling that move, I almost certainly would have ended up crashing down onto the floor. But instead, Don placed me back down with a gentle ease and a wicked smile. “Can’t you feel it? This isn’t the first time we’ve danced in each other’s arms.”

“I can,” I admitted in a whisper. I was getting lost in his eyes again. Ever since dinner, they still hadn’t changed back to blue. “It’s crazy, but...”

“Of course,” Don added as my words failed me. “The last time we did this, we had significantly fewer clothes on.”

I gulped as I stared up at him. I couldn’t help but imagine it.

Don’s strong, firm body in place of Simon’s. My breasts pressed against his chiseled chest. The thick muscles of his arms wrapped tight

around me. His cock, rock hard, throbbing against my stomach and my cunt burning hot between my legs.

The same way it burned for him now.

This was wrong. All of it. I wasn't dumb. I knew exactly how bad and weird all of this was.

My husband wasn't my husband.

The man I'd married had come straight from Hell itself.

He was here to protect me from some kind of demonic forces that wanted me dead.

It was still all a little crazy to try to hold in my mind at once.

But the longer Don held me in his arms, the easier it was becoming.

Yes, this was wrong.

But the way our bodies moved together, in such perfect sync, in such exquisite, sensual harmony...

It felt *right*.

That worried me. It scared me too.

But whether I liked it or not...

It excited me even more.

DON

By the time our song came to an end, I nearly had her eating out of the palm of my hand.

And as we fed each other pieces of wedding cake, I supposed she really was.

“Don’t mess up my lipstick,” Bea warned me. She opened her mouth slowly and sensually. It was enough to make my cock ache. Her brown eyes glimmered wickedly when they met mine.

“No?” I teased her with the piece of cake between my fingers, relishing the way she leaned toward me every time I moved it near. “Maybe I’d like to see your makeup smeared across that pretty face of yours.”

“Don’t even think about it, *darling*.” She grinned, nipping at the air in a flash of lovely white teeth as I pulled the cake away again. “If you do, I’ll make you pay for it. Dearly.”

“Is that so?” I liked the sound of that. “Tempting. Name your price.”

Bea’s eyes narrowed for a moment, then she laughed. “I doubt you can afford it.”

I slipped the bite of cake between her lips, behaving myself. For a moment, at least.

But I was sure to run my fingers slowly against her soft, wet tongue as I pulled them away.

“You’d be surprised what I can afford, *darling*,” I said back to her in a dark hush.

After all—a man could only be trusted to behave so much.

A woman, too, for that matter.

My cock stiffened in an instant as Bea's lips wrapped around my fingertips. My pants were suddenly far too tight as she sucked my fingers clean.

Fuck. For once, the crowd around us was dead silent. It was all too easy to imagine that they weren't there at all.

Easy to imagine taking Bea by the shoulders, pushing her down into that beautiful, expensive wedding cake we were eating from, flipping her skirts up and taking her then and there, too.

It was her turn to feed me, now.

But I could think of at least one thing I'd much rather be eating. Bea's cunt would be a far better thing to have on my tongue than wedding cake—though, as I recalled, it was just as sweet.

"That was dangerous of you, you know." Now, it was my time to give the warnings. Already, I was salivating. "I won't be quick to forget that."

In that moment, to have her lips wrapped around my cock instead, I would have paid any price she named.

"Let me help you take your mind off of it, then." Bea's nose wrinkled adorably as she snatched up her own piece of cake—and immediately mashed it against my lips.

After that, I couldn't really help myself—and she could hardly blame me.

I grabbed her waist and pulled her slender body against mine like a man starved. If she wanted to play dirty, she was welcome to it.

But as my lips crushed against hers, cake smearing between our mouths and tongues alike, I was more than happy to play dirty right back.

Frankly, she was too fucking cute not to kiss.

I half-expected her to slap me for it. After all, she'd made it very clear that she was hating every moment of our little charade.

But as her lips moved against mine, kissing me back, I couldn't help but wonder if they told a truth that her words had lacked.

She reached up to run her cake-covered fingers through my hair. Her hips moved against mine, firmly enough that I knew she couldn't miss how hard for her I was.

She kissed me like she'd never forgotten me at all. Kissed me passionately enough, I was beginning to question whether this was just a

continuation of her act to appease the guests...or if she was starting to get as lost in this as I was.

When our lips finally parted, a single glance at the guests solved that riddle for me quickly enough.

I knew how little Bea and Simon had cared for each other during their forced lifelong courtship. The one time that he'd ever tried to kiss her, she'd made sure that he would never try anything like that again. She'd told me so herself.

Bea's wedding guests were apparently just as aware of this reality. They'd expected to show up to see a bride and groom uniting in name and name alone—not making out over wedding cake.

They all looked stunned.

When Bea caught their wide-eyed gazes, after a moment, so did she.

At that point, I didn't think either of us could pretend that she was putting on an act anymore. The realization made me grin.

That kiss had been all for me.

I grabbed a napkin from the table and drew her away from the crowd to wipe the cake from her lips. She stared at me in wonder as I did it.

It was only when I finished that her brows furrowed together in anger again.

"You shouldn't have done that," she hissed up at me. "What do you think you're playing at?"

"Being your husband, I suppose." I folded the napkin and turned it over to wipe my own mouth clean as well. When I pulled it away from my lips once more, my grin had turned into a smirk. "But I don't think either of us is playing anymore."

"Oh, you're playing all right. With fire, I'll have you know." She snatched the napkin back from me to wipe her fingers clean. "So don't be surprised when you wind up—" Bea's eyes focused on something behind me. "Dad?"

"Well, look at you two lovebirds." An older man with a similar bone structure to Bea came up behind me and clapped me on the back. His dark hair was streaked with silver. His brown eyes were twinkling as he grinned at us both. "Seems like you're finally warming up to each other, aren't you?"

"Certainly took you long enough," said the elegant brunette at the man's side. Bea's mother, I assumed. She looked exactly how I imagined

Bea would in twenty years or so—though, I preferred Bea’s brown eyes to her greens, truth be told. “We’re relieved, of course, but...a little surprised. You should have warned us—we would have booked you one room on your honeymoon instead of two!”

“Well, I know how you love your surprises, Mom.” Bea’s lips shifted into a polite smile. Her tone suggested that her mother didn’t enjoy surprises at all.

“It’s just nice, Bea. That’s all we’re saying.” Bea’s father turned his grin toward me again. “It’s good to see the two of you finally getting along.”

“It’s not difficult.” My own grin was reserved only for Bea. She was the one who had put it on my lips, after all. “She’s a very easy woman to get along with.”

“I could make it harder for you, if you like.” Bea lips were still curled politely, but her eyes were full of threats when they met mine.

“I’m sure you could.” I dropped my gaze for half a second. Just to remind her that she’d been grinding her hips against my cock just a few moments ago. The way her smile had disappeared by the time I looked up again told me that she’d gotten the message loud and clear. I decided to make myself scarce before her parents caught on as well. “Champagne, anyone?”

I left them to catch up in my absence without waiting for an answer.

On our wedding day, I was hardly going to let my bride’s glass stay empty for long.

A waiter wasn’t hard to find at this reception. The entire garden was thick with them, tuxedos perfectly pressed and champagne or hors d’oeuvres on every tray.

But given the way Bea and I had just kissed...

If I wanted to keep my cock from busting through the zipper of these pants tonight, I was going to need something stiffer than champagne to take my mind off of my bride’s luscious lips.

I found the bar set up at the back of the garden. As I sat down and ordered an old fashioned, another man slipped onto the barstool next to mine.

“Enjoying yourself, son?”

I glanced over at him. He was tall with hair that was as much steely gray as it was black. His goatee was well-kempt, and his eyes were an icy

blue.

“Isn’t it obvious?” I gave him a warm smile and tossed a twenty down for the bartender. “How about you, Dad?”

I hadn’t had much time between taking Simon’s form and stealing his wife, but with the time I’d had, I’d done my research.

This was Simon’s father I was talking to. Levi Roth, finance mogul.

If I kept this charade up, I supposed in a way he’d be my father as well. That notion almost made me laugh. Whoever my dad was, I’d certainly never met him. Never cared to, either.

Sometimes, when it came to fathers, they were best left a mystery.

Specifically, when they were of the demonic persuasion.

I didn’t know how to expect Levi to react to my question, but the last thing I’d imagined was a look of surprise crossing his face.

“Interesting.” As the bartender brought over my drink, Levi gestured to it, ordering one of the same. “You’re putting on a good show, boy, but you can drop the act.”

The act...?

I knew what he expected. A reaction. Any kind. Either I’d deny it outright, feign confusion, swear at him—something. Anything.

But I wouldn’t give him that satisfaction.

If anything, I was impressed. There I was, a man sitting next to him looking like the spitting image of his son—and yet, he knew with a casual certainty that I wasn’t Simon Roth at all.

All night, only Bea had been close enough to me to see me for who I really was. Even after witnessing that kiss over the cake, Bea’s own parents had simply assumed that after so many years of chilly affections, Simon and Bea had finally started to fall in love.

But Levi Roth hadn’t been fooled. It meant he was either very clever, or he truly knew his son.

Or...

“Where do I know you from, Levi?” I took a sip of my drink and kept my eyes on the bartender’s hands. “I feel like you and I must have met somewhere before.”

“That depends on who you are, I suppose.” He tossed another twenty down on the bar, right next to mine. The bartender gave us both a nod of thanks as he gathered up his tips and served Levi his drink. “Let me guess—is it Malacoda? Moloch? Or...surely not Abaddon, is it?”

“Those are some big names to throw around so casually.” I placed my drink back down and licked a stray drop of bourbon from my lips. “A man has to wonder where you might have gotten them from.”

“Same place you did, I imagine.” Levi turned his body toward me. “Look at me.”

Slowly, I wheeled around on my barstool to face him as well.

“Hmm.” Levi caught my gaze and studied my eyes with interest. After a long moment, his lips twitched in a facsimile of a smile. “Ah. There you are. *Abaddon*. Nice glamor. It’s been a while.”

“Has it?”

He shrugged. “You tell me.”

I searched his eyes as well. Behind his icy blues, there was definitely something there. Something vast and unyielding. A pale, intense fire.

He was right.

It *had* been a while.

“Leviathan.” A laugh escaped my lips as everything clicked together for me. *Leviathan* Financial—all this time, he’d been hiding in plain sight. Before, I’d entertained the notion that Bea’s family might have made a deal with him somewhere down the line, but I’d never suspected that the man who’d sired ineffectual, pathetic Simon could possibly be a threat. The apple couldn’t have fallen farther from the tree if someone had chucked it across the garden. “Well. Fancy seeing you here.”

Now that I knew who Simon’s father really was, it all made more sense than I liked. The demon I’d heard speaking with Simon in the garden before I’d knocked him out and pushed him into the Abyss had mentioned that Simon had a powerful father.

And as far as powerful fathers went, Leviathan was certainly about as formidable as you could get.

“You’ll give your mother my regards when you see her next, I take it?” Levi smirked. “Haven’t seen her since the Fall.”

“Don’t suppose you would have,” I agreed. “You never quite made it to Hell, did you?”

“Not once I realized that Lucifer had already claimed it for himself.” Levi raised his glass to me. “Though, I hear its under new management these days. I suppose congratulations are in order. You’re king of Hell now, aren’t you?”

“One of them.” I didn’t bother raising my glass to him in return. Not until I knew what he wanted.

Leviathan had fallen from Heaven with Lucifer and the rest of the rebelling angels in the earliest days of Earth. My mother, Belial, had been among them as well. He’d been here on Earth ever since, with all the powers of a fallen angel but none of the responsibilities of Hell.

I’d only met him a few times. Each of them had been marked by a major disaster for the humans shortly after. A financial panic in the year 33, after Roman bankers issued too many unsecured loans. The crisis of 692, when Emperor Justinian II refused to accept the gold coins as tribute from a caliphate and had his nose cut off as a public act of torture as a result. The stock market crash of 1929.

Now that I knew it wasn’t truly Levi Roth who controlled Leviathan Bank with Bea’s father, but the fallen angel Leviathan himself, I had the distinct sensation that this evening might take a sharp turn for the worse.

It was a shame.

I’d only just started having fun.

“You don’t need to worry, Abaddon,” Levi said. Somehow, I doubted that. “The last thing I want from this evening is to ruin it. The wedding is going well, don’t you think?”

I arched an eyebrow. “For me, sure. For your son, on the other hand—”

“I’m not concerned about him.” Levi waved the mere mention of his son away with the back of his hand. “He was always a bit of a disappointment, honestly. I tried to create him in my image this time around, but...” He shrugged. “Maybe that’s a task best left to the Almighty. I failed. The powers he inherited from me were weak from the start, and he never quite managed to control them properly. I had no choice but to bind them away, before he hurt himself with them.” Levi sighed and shook his head. “In truth, Abaddon, I was quite happy to realize that someone else had taken his place.”

I snorted. Bit brutal—not that I could blame him.

Fallen angels weren’t exactly known for being the most nurturing parents in existence. My own mother was proof of that. Lucifer was the only exception to the rule I’d ever met.

“Beatrice seems happy too, don’t you think?” Levi nodded across the garden, where Bea was laughing and dancing with her friends on the dance floor. She looked radiant.

She always did.

“Can hardly blame her,” I said. “She’s mine.”

“And if you’re willing to keep up this charade, I’m happy to keep things that way. Bea’s family likes this new, improved version of my son. My friends and investors are impressed as well. Why ruin a good thing when it’s been dropped so serendipitously in your lap?”

“Not a bad policy,” I agreed. But no matter how amicable Levi’s words were, I still didn’t trust him. Words weren’t always true. “Though, I have to wonder why you’re telling me any of this at all.”

“Because I want to warn you,” Levi said with a shrug. “You may be a king of Hell now, but the moment you stepped into my son’s place today, you entered into *my* domain. I have very old and very powerful things in the works here, Abaddon. Things you won’t want to fuck with.”

“The only thing I’m interested in fucking tonight is my new wife.” I finished my drink and rose. “But thanks for the advice, *Dad*.”

“Always happy to give it, son.”

For fuck’s sake. He really didn’t care about Simon at all.

But before I returned to Bea’s side, I had one question for Levi.

It wasn’t anything I could act on right now. Not with so many humans around.

But it was worth asking just the same.

“Tell me,” I said down to him. “How does Bea fit into all of these ancient and powerful plans of yours?”

From the way his eyes sparked at my words, I knew that he understood my meaning.

There had been a plot on Bea’s life tonight. A plot orchestrated by Levi’s own son.

I needed to know if Levi was in on it as well.

“All I want is to see her happy,” Levi said, still smiling. I didn’t know whether to buy that or not. “If that means being married to you—well. Who am I to stand in the way of true love?”

Who indeed.

Bea was still in danger. I didn’t know from who, or how—only that she was.

And no matter what Leviathan said, I was almost certain he had something to do with it.

But that was a problem for tomorrow.

For tonight, Bea was mine—

And she would be forever, as long as I played my cards right from here
on out.

BEA

“**A**re you ready to get out of here?” Don whispered at me as he returned to my side.

I let out an exhausted sigh and nodded. Joan, Ava and I had hit the dance floor hard in his absence. The only thing about me that wasn’t aching and tired right now was my feet—and I had Don himself to thank for that. “Thought you’d never ask.”

We left the wedding reception quietly. The night was dark, the guests were happy, and the band was playing our getaway song.

All things considered, it had been a much better night than I’d expected.

I hadn’t expected much from my wedding to begin with.

But I never could have expected this.

For so many moments tonight, I’d almost forgotten that Don wasn’t really my husband.

And yet, at the same time, he very much was.

“You look tense,” I told him as he led me through the garden and around the house toward the driveway. “I thought that was my role tonight, not yours.”

“Do I?” Don glanced down at me, his hand on the small of my back. “I hadn’t noticed.”

“You do.” He did. In the time between the point when he’d disappeared under the guise of getting champagne and the point when he’d collected

me from the dance floor, it was like he'd replaced his shoulders with stiff, heavy steel. "Did something happen? Another shade? Did more *danger* finally rear its ugly head?"

"Maybe I'm just tired," Don suggested. "Aren't you?"

"A little," I admitted. I really was.

Even for a wedding, it had been a long day.

For a moment, I almost believed that he might be tired too. Out here in the dark, away from everyone else and lit only by moonlight, whatever trick he'd done to look like Simon was fading. Under the cover of darkness, he was beginning to look more like himself again.

His real self. The one that made my stomach flip-flop and my pulse pound and my heart race, just from looking at him.

And that was without the added benefit of Don's way with words.

"You did well tonight, Bea." He led me to a limousine parked outside of the estate in the circle driveway out front. "I hope you've realized that. I know how much all of this has been for you. I want you to know how brave you've been through all of it."

"Is that what I've been?" I asked him. "Brave?"

"Oh, Bea." In front of the limo, he took my shoulders in his hands and turned my body to face his. "You have no idea, do you?"

"Maybe I don't."

I stared up into his eyes and wondered what the hell I should have been doing with my hands. With the moonlight and the darkness and the way his face was slowly changing back into its true form, I felt like I should be pressing my hands to his chest and swooning—or something. Like the heroine on the cover of a paperback romance novel.

But as it was, my wrists hung limply at my sides, uncertain of whether I should give in and touch him the way my hands so desperately wanted to, or if I should give over to the sense of fear that hid beneath how bad I wanted him and simply push him away.

"Or maybe," I continued, "I just know how afraid of you I really am."

"You don't need to be afraid of me, darling." He rolled his lower lip beneath his tongue and slowly shook his head. "I may be a dangerous man—"

"A demon," I said. "You told me you were a demon. A king of Hell."

"And I am. You know it's true." He moved a hand from my shoulder and brushed his knuckles against the back of my cheek. "But I didn't just

come here to marry you.”

“Are you sure about that?” My eyes met his. A challenge. “That’s certainly what you ended up doing. Isn’t it?”

“I came here today to protect you.” Don’s eyes gleamed with honesty as they shifted from blue to gray. “I can’t explain everything to you right now. To give you the full scope of this situation—everything you’ve forgotten, and all the forces in play—I’d need hours. Maybe days.”

“Days?” I scoffed. “How much of you could there be to forget?”

“When we have a chance to get these clothes off, I’ll be more than happy to show you.” He cupped my cheek in his hand. The heat of his palm against my skin took my breath away. “I’m going to tell you everything. All of it, Bea. But to do that, you’ll need sleep, and we’ll both need time.”

“When?” That seemed like a reasonable question, all things considered.

After all, I’d been waiting around for answers all night.

“Soon,” Don promised. “But not tonight. You don’t want to spend your wedding night playing twenty questions, do you?”

The gentle buzz of champagne bubbled through me. “Did you have something else in mind?”

“If I did, I’d be a bastard for trying to make it happen.” Don moved his hand from my cheek to wipe something invisible to me from his mouth, which was quickly shifting from Simon’s thin lips into Don’s full, kissable smirk. “You’re exhausted, darling. I can see it in your eyes.”

“Not too tired to listen,” I said softly. “Try me. I’m all ears.”

Don only opened the door of the limo for me and ushered me through it. “All right. Get in, and I’ll try.”

But as soon as my ass hit the seat, I knew Don was right. I could feel every seam of my dress pressing indentations into my skin. My ribs ached from spending too long trussed into fabric that clung to my body so tight. My eyes were sore, and my knees felt like jelly. Even my tits hurt.

I still wanted answers. I needed them.

But whatever exhaustion Don saw in me, I felt every bit of it as soon as my body was allowed to sit down.

Fuck.

“Okay, then, brown eyes. What do you want to know first?” Don asked as he climbed in behind me.

I blinked up at him as he wrapped his arm around my shoulders. I shouldn't have wanted that. Shouldn't have liked it, either.

But I did want it, and I did like it.

I was tired, and inside the limo, Don didn't look like Simon at all anymore.

Too tired to stop myself from giving in, and against my better judgment, I cuddled against Don's chest. Just a little bit.

But as soon as I moved for him, Don wrapped his other arm around my waist and pulled me closer. He certainly had a way of turning a little into a lot.

"When you knew me before..." I was sleepy enough that I was struggling to put my ideas into words. But I did my best. "Is that what you called me? *Brown eyes*?"

"Sometimes," said Don. "Sometimes, I called you *kitten*, or *sweetheart* or *sunshine*. Or *darling*. You're always darling. The rest depended on my mood—and yours."

It was a nice notion, at least.

Kitten. I liked that.

I liked it a lot.

"Is Simon somewhere safe?" I should have asked that question hours ago and I knew it. But the fact of the matter was, there'd been so many other things to ask...

And if what Don had said about Simon was true, then I really had no reason to care about how Simon was at all.

"Safe enough until I deal with him," Don said. "But once he's been dealt with...I can't make any promises."

I nodded against Don's chest.

Safe enough.

Maybe that was what Simon really deserved.

If what Don said was true.

"Am I still in danger now?" I asked him. My eyelids were heavy. Don's chest was comfortable and warm.

"Not at the moment, I don't think," Don purred down at me. He stroked the back of my head, smoothing down my hair over my veil. "But even if you were, kitten—" I smiled at the word. "I'd keep you safe."

"Promise?" The world was getting fuzzy. Don was sweet and kind.

"Promise," he said. "On my life."

DON

It was almost unfair, how beautiful she was.

She fell asleep on me in the limo almost immediately. As her head got heavier against my chest and her questions turned into gentle, almost nonsensical mumbles, I held her close.

She smelled like warm vanilla and dark jasmine. Her dress pooled around the delicate flare of her hips like white seafoam on ocean waves. Her hair tumbled down her shoulders in soft curls of rich, cool silk. Her dark lashes were long and thick. They fluttered gently as she dozed, which told me she was already dreaming.

Once upon a time, she'd told me all of her dreams. The recurring ones, like running barefoot through a vineyard that became more of a maze the harder she tried to escape it, and the silly ones too.

I wondered what she dreamed about now.

"Is she all right, Your Majesty?" Charon opened the limo's door for me once we'd reached our destination. His steely brow was knitted in concern.

"She's had a long day." Carefully, I scooped Bea up into my arms and eased her out of the backseat. "That's all."

"Do you need help with her?" Charon asked, closing the door behind me.

Quietly, I laughed. "I think I can handle things from here."

Bea might have been sleeping like a sack of rocks, but her body was still light as a feather in my arms.

The other limo—the one I'd had Charon cancel shortly after I'd decided to take Simon's place today—would have taken us to some overpriced hotel suite with separate beds in separate rooms, I had no doubt.

Bea might have been napping away our wedding night, but there were worse ways she could have ended the evening. If her only choices were being here, being with Simon, or being dead, I was glad that she'd ended up dreaming in my arms.

Besides, I had something much more exciting to offer her than a hotel room tonight.

I shifted her body in my arms and stuck out a finger to press through the fabric of the veil. It clung to my fingertip like gossamer and slowly separated as I dragged it down to create an opening.

The first threshold I would carry Bea through would be the one that separated her realm and mine.

"Are you certain about this, Your Majesty?" Charon's eyes met mine. "If you take her through there, your agreement with the angels is broken."

"I know, Charon. But I'm afraid I don't have another choice." I didn't take this lightly. To maintain the order between Heaven, Hell and Earth that Lucifer had disrupted when he sired a child, Heaven and Hell had agreed to keep humans out of our affairs. Already, I'd fractured that promise by marrying Bea in the first place. By bringing Bea into my domain, I would shatter it.

But Bea's idiot fiancé had already violated the agreement when he ordered demonic assassins after her.

Now, taking her into Abyss was the only way I knew for sure that she would be safe.

"Should I alert Lucifer and Evie?" Charon asked. "When the angels hear about this—and eventually, they will—we have no idea how they might retaliate."

"The angels won't be after Lucifer and Evie," I said with certainty. "They may have been our enemies once, but they're not monsters—or idiots. The Almighty has blessed Lucifer's new little family, their daughter included. They can't be harmed—and even if they could, the angels would never stoop so low as to harm a child."

"It's not Lucifer and his family that I'm worried about," Charon admitted. "It's you and Beatrice, Your Majesty. The angels may not be

willing to harm children, but they've proven more than capable of targeting human women in the past."

"All the better reason to keep her at Nevermore." *Where angels feared to tread.* I gave Charon a nod. "I appreciate your concerns, Charon, but I know what's best for my woman."

My bride.

Charon returned my nod and took a step back. "Very well, my king. You'll let me know if you need anything?"

I smiled. "I think right now, the only thing I need is the chance to put my wife to bed."

IN THE ABYSS, the world was usually black and white. No colors lived here in my realm. An entire universe as gray as my eyes.

But Bea's presence changed that.

It always did.

Everywhere she went here, every piece of this place she touched, turned to Technicolor in an instant. The rose on my lapel stayed red, just for being near her. So did the brown in her hair and the lovely burgundy color painted on her lips.

As I carried her through Nevermore's gardens, the grass turned green, and the flowers of the hedges blushed yellow and orange and pink like some unseen watercolor artist had just dipped their brush to our canvas.

When I laid her down on the silk sheets in the master bedroom, she turned them a beautiful, glowing gold.

It was how I knew I loved her. One of many ways, I supposed.

My world here in the Abyss had always been a dim, bleak-looking one. Before I'd met her, I'd almost come to prefer it that way.

But where before, there had only been grayscale, Bea brought a flush of color into my life.

"I thought I'd lost you, darling." I whispered the words down to her as I turned her on her side and unlaced her dress. Maybe that was wrong of me. If she'd been awake, Bea might have slapped me for my forwardness.

But when I peeled the fabric away from her body, I saw the indentations every seam of her gown had left in her skin. She'd been bound up in the thing all day. If I left her in it now, she'd wake up aching from it.

There was only part of Bea that I wanted to leave aching now that she was mine—and I wouldn't be claiming that tonight.

"Pretty thing." I eased the comb of her veil out of her hair and removed all of the pins. Along with the dress, I placed it aside. "When they took your memories of me away from you, I never thought I'd be truly happy ever again, you know."

These were things that I couldn't say to Bea. Not when she was awake, at least—not yet.

Without her memories, there was no way she'd be able to understand my heartbreak.

Not when she couldn't even recall her own.

Was bringing her here dangerous? Of course it was. Charon was right—the angels would discover what I'd done today eventually. When they did, it was entirely possible that they'd be out for blood.

But the angels couldn't enter the Abyss without burning for it. To conquer it, they'd have to conquer Hell itself first.

Hell wasn't safe for Bea either. Nor was Earth.

Here in Nevermore, I would keep her. I'd protect her.

And best of all, I'd have her all to myself.

"You're mine, Bea." I slipped her feet from her shoes and unfastened the necklace of heavy diamonds from her neck. I wanted to kiss her lips, but as unconscious as she was, I knew that wouldn't be right.

Instead, I smoothed her hair down away from her brow and kissed her cheek.

I was determined that the next kiss I had from Bea would be a kiss she gave me of her own full knowledge and free will.

We had some difficult days left ahead of us. Giving Bea her memories back was only a small part of it.

I'd need to interrogate Simon. Find out what demon he'd made his dark deal with and what they'd expected to get out of it in return.

I'd need to deal with Simon's father, too. Leviathan was yet again playing some kind of sinister game on Earth. That much was clear. He may have approved of my decision to take his son's place as Bea's husband today, but I suspected he had something far more devious than just the appeasement of his investors and human friends in the works.

And maybe most importantly of all, now that I had Bea here, I had to find a way to keep her here. She'd been sweet and willing enough to go

with me tonight, but come morning when she was rested and refreshed, I couldn't guarantee that she would choose to stay.

But she *had* to stay. Her life depended on it.

And in so many ways...

So did mine.

BEA

I woke up the same way every bride wants to wake up on the morning after her wedding night: in a soft, warm bed in a gorgeous bedroom to the scent of clean linen and the sound of my new husband showering in the en suite.

There was just one problem. Two, really, if I was going to split hairs about it.

Don wasn't the man I was supposed to have married last night, and this definitely wasn't my luxurious private honeymoon suite.

Not that I was complaining.

I didn't exactly adore the man that I'd been supposed to marry. Thanks to Simon, Don had been forced to save my life yesterday.

By taking Simon's place at the altar, he might have even saved my life more than once.

As for dealing with the fallout of Don's actions and figuring out where I was, I could face all of that in a little while.

The room was full of vases of deep red roses. The sheets beneath me gleamed like they'd been spun from gold.

And from the shower, if I listened close, I was pretty sure I could hear Don singing while he washed.

I closed my eyes and cuddled deeper into the blankets, for a moment. The sound of his voice was faint, but every note I could hear was low and perfect.

It took me a second to recognize what he was singing, but when I did, I smiled.

Frankie Valli. "Can't Take My Eyes Off of You."

Definitely more romantic than The Police, at any rate.

I moved my legs back and forth against the sheets like I was swimming. They were slick and silken against my skin.

I luxuriated in the sensation for a little while before I realized that I wasn't wearing my dress anymore.

A quick peek beneath the sheets confirmed it: someone—and I suspected I knew exactly who—had taken my dress off before putting me to bed last night.

"Don," I growled, scowling as I spotted my dress, veil, shoes, and jewelry neatly laid out on a deep red armchair across the room next to the tux Don had worn last night. "You incorrigible, horny bastard."

"I don't know about incorrigible." Don opened the door of the bathroom, releasing a cloud of steam. When it cleared, he stood there in the doorway, glistening wet and dressed only in a towel around his waist. "But the rest of it sounds about right."

Slowly, I sat up, blinking as I stared at him.

My heart was thudding against my chest again. My lips fell open softly as wetness flooded in beneath my tongue.

And my mouth wasn't the only thing getting wet.

"Speechless?" Don smirked and stepped out of the bathroom. Water dripped from his dark, slicked-back hair and trailed down his body, tracing the natural channels formed by the muscles of his chest. "That's rather unlike you, darling."

"Is it?" I rolled tongue over my lower lip. I couldn't bring myself to look away.

I'd known that Don was strong. His thick, hard muscles had been apparent even when he'd had his tux on, and he'd carried me like I weighed nothing more than a little lost kitten he could cradle against his chest.

But there was a difference between knowing something and actually *seeing* it. Every inch of his body, both above and below the towel, was rock hard and so delicious looking, for a moment all I wanted to do was sink my teeth into him.

He didn't look human. I'd known plenty of models and bodybuilders and rich playboys who had nothing better to do than spend all their time getting shredded.

Don, though...

He was so gorgeous, he barely even looked *real*.

"Normally, you're not the kind of woman who wastes a lot of energy holding your tongue." Don walked to the side of the bed. Greedily, my eyes tracked his every move. "I've always liked that about you." He took my chin in his hand and turned my face up toward his. I was grateful for that—if he hadn't, I could have spent the rest of the morning imagining running the tip of my tongue over the outline of his abs. "You were never afraid to speak your mind."

"I'm still not," I whispered up to him, clutching the top sheet to my chest.

"Mm. But you've gone silent now, haven't you? A man has to wonder what on earth you must be thinking."

Slowly, I furrowed my brows until my eyes were glinting in a glare.

"I'm thinking that I must have actually married a demon last night," I told him. "And I'm thinking that he must be some kind of pervert, since it appears he took the liberty of stripping me naked while I was asleep."

"Not completely naked." Don's towel shifted a little lower as he reached out to run his fingers over the laced edge of my bra. "I could have undressed you even more."

"Yes, Don." My cunt flushed hot just imagining Don sliding off my panties and unclasping my bra, but I managed to keep my voice cold as ice. "I'm so very grateful that you carried me to your bed and so graciously had your way with my body while I slept."

"You think so little of me, Bea." Don's smile was warm, if a touch patronizing. He lowered his hand from my chin so he could adjust his towel. If anything, it seemed even lower now. I gulped. "If I'd had my way with you last night, I can assure you—you would have remembered it."

"All right..." I arched an eyebrow and struggled to keep my eyes on his face, not the deep V of his abs as they descended beneath the towel. "So, you're telling me you weren't ogling my mostly naked body while I was passed out?"

"I didn't say that." Don chuckled and turned toward the wardrobe. "I like to think of myself as a good man, darling—but even good men have

their limits.”

Fuck. He was gorgeous. He was dangerous looking. And even when I was chastising him for getting me out of my dress while I slept, I couldn’t help but imagine how nice it would be if he undressed me just a *little* more.

But this was hardly the time to let my pussy do the thinking for me.

As I heard Don’s towel drop to the floor, I forced myself to become very interested in the paneling on the wall of the other side of the room.

“So, it wasn’t a nightmare. You’re really a demon.” Of course he was. After everything that had happened yesterday, nothing else made sense. As far as small talk went, it was a dumb thing to say.

But the knowledge that Don was mere feet from me, completely nude as he rifled through the wardrobe for something to wear, was making it a little difficult to keep my thoughts straight right now.

“I am,” Don said simply. “Do you want to see my wings again? My horns, maybe?”

“I think you should keep your horns to yourself, thank you.” I drew in a deep breath and pressed my knees together. “And you’re, um, *you’re* definitely real? Not some kind of fucked-up wet dream?”

“A *wet* dream?” Don laughed. “Is that what was happening in that pretty head of yours last night?”

“I didn’t dream at all.” My cheeks were burning now. *Wet.* Why the *fuck* did I have to say *wet*? I needed to change the subject. Fast. “And you’re really my husband.”

“Not legally, I suppose,” Don admitted. “But in the eyes of the Almighty—yes, Bea, I imagine I am.” I felt him shift nearer to me again. My head was still turned away, but I could feel the heat of his body. It radiated off of him like the flames of Hell itself. “And to answer your next question—yes, it’s safe to look.”

I bit my lip.

Of course I wanted to look at him. He was hot, he was dangerous, and somehow—against all odds—he was *mine*.

Dammit.

Maybe it wasn’t worth fighting anymore.

Slowly, I turned my head to look at him. My pulse raced at the thought of seeing Don’s rugged, naked body towering over me while I sat in his bed, mostly naked myself.

My cunt clenched.

If the rest of him was so gorgeous, I could only imagine how perfect his cock must look.

But instead of thick, hard cock throbbing in my face, I was met by the sight of Don dressed in a pair of tan pants and a thin, white shirt, still unbuttoned down the front.

“Oh,” I breathed. My eyes raked up his body until I was staring into his grays again. “You’re dressed.”

“What did you think *safe* meant?” As he sat down on the edge of the bed next to me, he was smirking again.

“I thought—” I clenched my jaw. I’d *thought* it meant he wouldn’t mind me staring. God. There might have actually been such a thing as *too* good-looking. Don’s mere existence was melting my brain. My cheeks burned even hotter as I tore my gaze away. “It doesn’t matter. Thank you for putting on clothes.”

At least now I might be able to keep my head straight.

“No need to thank me.” He reached out to brush his fingertips against my knee over the sheets. “Frankly, it sounds a little like you might want me to take them back off.”

“Oh, you’d love that, I’m sure.” I glowered at his fingers and shivered as they stroked down my calf.

“You might like it too,” Don said. “Though, if this is your way of angling for a striptease, I hope you’re prepared to go tit for tat.”

I glanced up at him again. “I’m not trying to get you naked, Don.”

“Is that so?” Don didn’t look convinced. “Why not?”

“Maybe because last I checked, before you dragged me to Hell with you—”

“Carried, really,” Don corrected me. “And this is hardly Hell. Not hot enough.” He winked. “Yet, anyway.”

“I’m still in danger, aren’t I? This hardly seems like a good time for my valiant protector husband to be caught with his pants down,” I reminded him. “And I distinctly recall there being some kind of plot on my life that got us both into this mess.”

“I wouldn’t call it a mess, exactly. The bed’s a little rumpled, sure. But I *did* shower.” Don raked his fingers through his still-damp hair. “As for the danger you’re in, you’re safe from all of it here, Bea. You’re in

Nevermore, my mansion here in the Abyss. You're inside my domain. The only being in all the realms who can open portals to this place is me."

I pursed my lips. "You know how insane all of this sounds, don't you?"

"Not really," Don admitted. "It's been my reality for my entire life."

"For *me*, I mean. Heaven, Hell—that thing that attacked me after the wedding ceremony." I shivered as I remembered how fiercely Don had fought it. "It's all a little much, Don. If this is some kind of a trick—"

"Does it feel like one?"

"No." I was almost uncomfortable with how easy that question was to answer. "It feels...rational, somehow. Even though it shouldn't."

None of this was rational at all.

I remembered Joan's words when I'd explained the whole demon thing to her and Ava. *Like a dream that I forgot as soon as I woke up...* Yeah. That was pretty spot on.

"Then tell me this," said Don, "do you hesitate to believe what I'm telling you because your instincts are telling you that I'm lying—or are you hesitating because you're afraid of what it means for you if I'm not?"

I stared down at my lap for a moment. "The second one, I guess. If we really are in some kind of other world—if this really is the only place where you can keep me safe from all the insane, demonic things that want me dead—then I suppose it means that I won't be able to leave."

"Why would you want to?" Don gestured to the room around us. "Does this displease you?"

"No," I said quietly. I wasn't looking at the room, though. I was looking at him. "No, it doesn't."

"Good. I don't want to have to keep you prisoner here." Don's eyes glinted with a dark wickedness for a moment. "Though, if you make me..."

"If I'm safe here, then I'll stay. For a while," I accepted. The last thing I needed right now was to turn into Don's captive. For...various reasons. Every single one of them, dripping with sin. "But I *will* have to go back to...to *Earth* eventually, Don." *Earth*. Even saying it like that meant admitting that I was in a place that wasn't Earth at all. "I still have a life there. I can't just abandon it. Is there some kind of way I can go back to it safely?"

"There is," Don said with a nod. "But..."

I sighed. "Of course there's a but."

“We could stop dancing around it and simply consummate our marriage.” Don said it like that was a normal, casual thing to say. And if we were any other married couple, I supposed it would have been.

But there was nothing normal about this situation.

Least of all the husband from Hell currently smoldering at me from the edge of the bed.

“You said that we’ve, ah...” I tried to think of any word other than *fucked*. Not exactly easy in that moment. “Been intimate together before. I think dancing naked in each other’s arms was mentioned, at least.”

“*Been intimate?*” Don laughed. “That’s one way of putting it.”

“Doesn’t that count?” I asked. “Unless you’re lying, I feel like it should.”

“Being intimate in a past you don’t remember isn’t quite the same as fucking as husband and wife.” Don was moving his hand back up my calf again. Even through the sheet, I could feel the heat of his palm. “If you’re still concerned that I’m lying, though... I could always just show you.”

“Show me...the two of us fucking? In a memory?” That sounded insane. But then again, so did everything else Don had opened my eyes to in the last twenty-four hours. “How?”

“Depends. Do you want it, Bea?” His hand rose back up to my knee again.

“Depends.” I placed my hand over his, stopping him before he got any wise ideas about conquering my thighs next. “What’s it going to cost me?”

“What do you charge a woman who can afford everything?” Don turned his hand over and wove his fingers into the spaces between mine.

“Name your price.” I found myself smiling at him. “I could always write you a check.”

“Your money is no good here, darling.” Don’s smile shifted to match mine. “How about a kiss?”

I let out a long, slow breath.

If Don was telling the truth about our forgotten past, then we’d done far more than a little kissing.

And if that was what he wanted in exchange for my memory...

I didn’t see how it could hurt.

“All right,” I agreed. “A kiss, then.”

I closed my eyes, leaned forward, and puckered my lips.

Don only laughed. After a moment, I opened my eyes again and frowned.

“What?” I asked.

“I don’t know how you think I used to kiss you, Bea.” He shifted closer, took my face in his hands, and moved his lips toward mine. His voice lowered to a hush. “But it sure as hell wasn’t like that.”

I waited for him to steal the kiss. To take it from me. Claim it, like he’d claimed the others.

But he didn’t. His eyes only glimmered darkly as they stayed locked on mine.

Oh.

It took me a second before I realized what he wanted.

When I finally did, I felt a little stupid for not understanding sooner.

He didn’t just want to kiss me.

He wanted *me* to kiss *him*.

Slowly, I leaned toward him. I closed the gap between us.

I pressed my lips against his.

I did it expecting to pull myself away from him as soon as contact had been made. The bare minimum. Just a peck.

That was stupid of me too.

As soon as he kissed me back, I couldn’t bring myself to stop kissing him.

Partly because it felt so good, so real and so fucking right—

Partly because I was no longer in Don’s bed, in his mansion, in his realm.

I was somewhere else.

Somewhere in a memory...

“Bastard,” I breathed at him as our kiss broke. We were stumbling into my apartment in Los Angeles, clinging to each other. My hands were shaking and my body ached, and if I stopped touching him for even just a single moment, I was certain that I’d fall apart. “You shouldn’t have done that.”

“Shouldn’t have done what?” Don laughed humorlessly as he pulled me through the door and slammed it shut behind us. “Saved your life?”

“Risky yours.” I shook my head as he ran his fingers through my hair. It had been in an updo when we’d left Vegas earlier that evening. Now, it was a tangled, fallen mess. “I don’t like when you try to trade your life for mine.”

“You’re right,” he admitted, drawing the bobby pins from my hair until it all came tumbling down over my shoulder in a cascade of wild, messy waves. “It’s hardly a fair trade.”

“I’m glad we agree.”

“You didn’t let me finish.”

I arched an eyebrow. It ached to do it. One of the humans that the angels had bewitched and sent to attack us had hit me hard enough with their fist to bruise my brow bone.

"I always let you finish," I reminded him.

Don laughed. "Clever. And true."

He moved his lips to the bruise on my brow and kissed it.

"It's not a fair trade," he whispered, trailing his kisses to my ear. "Because my life isn't worth as much as yours."

I pulled away, frowning. "That's not true at all."

"It's true to me."

"Not to me, though." I hated the notion. Mostly because it forced me to admit that I believed the exact opposite: his life was worth more to me than mine. "Take it back."

"I could, Bea." He stared down at me for a moment, blood on his temple and exhaustion in his eyes. His lower lip had been split. That didn't stop him from shifting his mouth into a slow, tired half-smirk. "But if it's all the same to you, I'd rather take you to bed."

Bed. That sounded amazing. My body was sore. My head hurt.

My heart hurt, too.

We'd been attacked right outside my apartment building. They'd been waiting for us the moment we'd stepped out of the Abyss.

It was what I got for living in Los Angeles, I guessed. City of Angels.

If I'd known what formidable enemies angels could be, maybe I wouldn't have moved there in the first place.

Don had fought our attackers off handily. He hadn't even hurt them. He knew that they were just humans acting on the angels' will. They didn't really want to hurt us, either.

When they finally came out from under their enchantment, they wouldn't even remember who they were.

I hadn't been nearly as effective in the fight, though. I'd been overwhelmed quickly. And Don, like a knight in shining Armani, had fought like hell to come to my aid. He'd taken plenty of knocks to get there, too.

Once again, he'd saved me. It was far from the first time. It'd probably be far from the last.

There was nothing that sounded better right now than being in bed—but I didn't want to go there alone.

Not tonight.

"Will you come to bed with me?" I asked, hopeful. "It's been a long night. If you wanted to sleep over, it'd be all right."

Don chuckled and pulled me against him again. His lips were a comfort. They stirred things in me that no one else had ever made me feel.

"I will," he whispered. "But I think you've missed my meaning. Sleep wasn't exactly what I had in mind."

I bit my lip as Don took my hand. Willingly, I followed him down the hall to my room. With every step, my body flooded with fire and want.

We'd fucked before. Plenty of times. This was nothing serious—or it hadn't been. Not at the start.

Maybe we'd just done it too many times. That was how it worked for other people, or so I assumed. You rolled around between the sheets together enough, and suddenly in all that friction, feelings were born.

Maybe Don had saved my life too many times.

Maybe, this was all just inevitable.

I'd never fallen for anyone before.

As we fell into bed together, I knew I was falling for him now.

"Let's get you out of these clothes." Don pushed me onto my stomach, and I kicked off my heels. The zipper of my dress whispered as he pulled it down. His lips chased after it, kissing every inch of my skin the dress revealed as it fell away.

"That feels amazing." I closed my eyes and let the heat of Don's kisses mingle with the molten warmth that was pooling inside me. "Your lips always do."

"Good." He grabbed my hip and rolled me over onto my side. "Because you're shaking."

"Am I?" I held out my hand and watched it tremble.

I was.

Whether it was because of the fight we'd just narrowly escaped from, or because of him, it was hard to say.

"Come here." Don took my hand and rolled me over the rest of the way, so I was facing him once more. His arms wound around my body, holding me tight. "You don't need to be afraid."

"I'm not."

"You are," Don said with certainty. "But you're safe now. For as long as you're mine, you always will be."

"Is that what I am?" Our lips were dangerously close. He smelled like mint and leather and, faintly, like blood. I knew if he kissed me now, I'd lose all control. "Yours?"

Gently, Don smiled. “You are. You’re mine, and you will be for the rest of your life.”

“And if I don’t agree?”

Don chuckled. “Oh, darling. You belong to me whether you like it or not.”

He stole the kiss. He had a way of doing that—laying claim to things. Conquering.

Had he conquered me too?

As his tongue flicked against mine, devilish and greedy, heat pounded through my body and a dark elation roared through my veins.

Yes. He had, and I knew it, and he did too.

He’d claimed me. More completely than any other man ever had, he’d made me his.

I shifted my thigh up to hug Don’s hip and ran my fingers through his hair, deepening our kiss.

If I really belonged to Don now—belonged to him in the way I’d always suspected wasn’t even possible, let alone *real*—then I’d be damned if he wasn’t mine, too.

We shed our clothes the way autumn trees lose their leaves. Slowly, slowly, then in the blink of an eye, they were gone. He slipped my dress from my shoulders as I eased the buttons from the fastenings of his shirt. Our bodies rose and fell as we helped each other undress. But the fewer clothes we had between us, the faster our fingers worked. The more our hands roamed.

We stripped each other naked with a mutual hunger, until there was nothing left between us at all except for longing.

Finally. Warm, flushed skin against skin.

Don’s lips crashed against mine, as greedy as even a demon’s could ever be. His tongue prodded against my mouth again, insistent. Just as eagerly, I met it with my own. As we kissed, we reveled in each other’s heat. He tasted like blood and ice and need. His cock had been hard since we’d stumbled in tonight, but as he pressed it against the swollen lips of my cunt, I felt it get even harder.

Fuck. How was that even possible? I wanted to ask him, but that would have meant breaking our kiss.

And the truth was, I already knew the answer.

With Don, everything was possible.

Even Heaven. Even Hell.

Even falling in love.

"Please," I begged him as he rolled on top of me. "Take me. Now."

Don slapped his cock down on my cunt, shifting his hips just enough that I could feel exactly how deep he'd go.

Deep enough to break me, maybe—

But I was in bed with a demon. To be broken right now—it was a wonder that I'd ever wanted anything else.

His lips fell on my neck. His tongue lapped against the delicate skin there. His teeth scraped against my collarbone, then he let out a ragged breath.

"I know you want it, kitten," he whispered against my skin. "But I need to warn you—"

"You don't," I promised. "Anything you want from me, you can have."

"I need to warn you," he repeated, rising up to stare down into my eyes again. His grays were darker than I'd ever seen them. "Once I'm inside you, I won't be able to stop."

"Then don't," I whispered back to him. "Fucking don't."

That was all it took. He shifted his cock down, pausing only to slide it up and down my slit until his shaft was covered in my honey.

It didn't take long. I was already soaked.

"Take it, then." He pulled back and forced his cock inside me. There was no more need for foreplay. No desire from either of us to deny ourselves what we really wanted. Not now.

I cried out as he sheathed himself in me. Pleasure and pain were undecipherable from each other. Perfect, exquisite bliss.

He stopped me from screaming with another conquering kiss. Only, he wasn't conquering anything anymore—not really.

He was only taking what we both knew was already his.

I wrapped my legs around his waist, pulling him deeper still. He didn't need any encouragement for that, though. His hips slammed against my thighs with raw force that only yielded so he could draw back and thrust inside me all over again. My chest rose and fell with quick, shallow breaths like I was hyperventilating. Animalistic growls left his lips in return.

My fingers scrambled against his chest, then his neck as I struggled to find something to hold onto. Not that it mattered. Don wasn't interested in

being held.

“Mine.” He forced the words through his teeth as he gathered my wrists in one of his hands. He pinned them up over my head, then wound his other arm around my waist. His abs clenched against my ribs as he lifted me upright against him. Only when he had me right where he wanted me did he release my wrists so I could cling to him. “All mine.”

“Yours,” I agreed immediately. In that moment, he could have told me that the Earth was flat, and God was dead and two plus two equaled whipped cream, and I would have only moaned yes in return. “All yours.”

His arms wrapped around me, holding me tight. As I wound my arms around his shoulders in return, holding on for dear life, my fingers brushed against sleek, dark feathers.

His wings. Behind him, they unfolded from between his shoulder blades. With only two sharp flaps, they propelled us upward. Suddenly, we were airborne. Fucking, suspended somewhere between the bed and the ceiling.

It felt like being caught between Heaven and Hell.

“Fuck—*Don*,” I panted as my eyelashes fluttered. Something was building inside me, a tension that was desperate for release.

“What’s wrong, Bea? This is what you wanted, isn’t it?” He angled his hips up sharply to thrust right up against my G-spot. It earned him a high, sharp cry that tumbled from my lips like stars from the sky. “You wanted me to take you. You wanted me to show you how completely mine you are.”

“I did,” I breathed. “I do. I am.”

“I told you that once I started, I wouldn’t be able to stop.” His hand wrapped around my throat. He moved his lips to my earlobe, nipping at it as he purred the words into the shell of my ear. “And I won’t. Not even if you beg me. Not even if you cry and scream and plead.”

I clung to him even tighter. There were tears in my eyes already. In my throat, every whimper threatened to turn into a ragged wail—but not for help. I didn’t want him to stop.

He had me now, and I had him.

Now, I only wanted more.

“Do you know why I won’t stop, Bea?”

I clenched my eyes shut and dug my nails into his shoulders. My cheek pressed hard against the side of his face. My every muscle was wound so

tight, when he finally sent me over the edge, I didn't know if I was going to pass out or fall apart or simply explode.

"I won't stop because I can't," he grunted. "Because your hot, tight cunt is fucking heroin, and because I'm addicted to your little whimpers and moans."

I bit my lip, but that only made the tension inside me even worse. Instead, I moved my teeth to the thick muscle of his neck, slick with sweat. As I bit into him, my tongue lapped against his skin and my mouth was filled with the delicious taste of him. Hellfire and sweetness and salt.

"I won't stop because you belong to me." His voice was louder now. Just short of a roar. "And I won't stop because you don't fucking want me to, do you, you perfect little slut?"

"Oh, *god*." I was shaking all over again as I forced the words from my throat.

He only fucked me harder for that.

"No, Bea. Not God. Not here." He tilted our bodies downward. In an instant, my heart leapt up in my chest and we were falling. We hit the mattress hard enough, for a moment I was sure we'd broken the bed frame—and I was even more certain I didn't care. "Only me."

"Don." I said his name like it was a prayer. Right now, it was the only one I knew. "Don—I'm going to...going to come—"

"No." His command only pushed me that much closer to losing control. "Don't. Not until I say you're allowed."

Tears rolled down my cheeks as I slammed my head back against the pillow beneath me. My pride was gone. My dignity had been left at the door. My cunt was throbbing wildly, squeezing his... "Don, please—"

"No," he growled again. "Not until you say it, Bea."

"Yes," I promised frantically. Immediately. The room was spinning around me. I still felt like I was floating, even now that Don had brought us back down. "Anything. Anything you want."

"You know what I want." Don wrapped his arm around my crown and rested his forehead against mine. "You know exactly what I fucking want."

"Anything," I swore again. "Anything at all."

"The truth, Bea." His kiss seared against my lips, hard and quick. "I want the fucking truth."

"I can't lie, Don." I couldn't. My soul was arching up, ready to leave my body. In that moment, I was made of nothing but truth. "Not to you."

Not ever.”

“Then who do you belong to?”

“You,” I answered. I didn’t even have to think about it.

“That’s right. Not Simon. Not anyone who’s had you before me. Only me.”

“Only you.” I nodded fervently against him. “Only you.”

“What else, Bea?” His hand shifted down between my legs, stroking my clit as his thick cock continued to slam up into my core. “I won’t settle. Not for anything less than all of you. You’re mine, kitten—and I want it all.”

“I love you,” I sobbed. “Please, Don—I love you!”

He had my body. He had my heart. He had my soul.

If he wanted it all, he had it.

There was nothing more of me to give.

“I love you too.” His mouth dove towards my ear again. “It’s the truth, Bea. I love you too.”

My breath left my lungs with relief. For having finally admitted it. For saying it out loud and finally making it real.

“Now,” he growled. “Come.”

My eyes shot open. The next breath I drew felt like I was being possessed—and maybe I was. My body tensed and released violently—not just my cunt, not just my clit, not just my womb, but *all* of me. I spasmed and I gasped, and I held onto him like I’d die if I let go. My pussy gushed with honey, milky and thin and so hot I could smell it between us.

It only allowed Don to fuck me harder. Faster. Every throb of my cunt felt like I was grabbing hold of his shaft and pulling him in until he was pushed over the edge as well.

With a roar, he spilled his seed into me. His thrusts turned sharp and, impossibly, even deeper. Every single one of them sent an explosion of pleasure wracking through my body until the stars in my vision burst into fireworks, then turned white-hot like I was staring straight into the sun.

I lost myself in the intensity of it.

I lost myself in him.

“Fuck,” I whispered up at him as his hips finally came to rest against my thighs. I blinked, trying desperately to refocus my gaze. His cum dripped from my cunt, still so hot and so slick. When my eyes met his, I

felt my pupils widen. He was gorgeous, and he was mine, and I was completely in awe. “*Fuck.*”

“Yes, kitten.” He gave me a lazy smile and brushed my sweat-dampened hair away from my cheek. “*Fuck, indeed.*”

Then, he pulled my lips to his and kissed me all over again.

It was a kiss I never wanted to end.

I loved him. I needed him. I wanted to be his and his alone. Forever. My parents’ wishes and my betrothal to Simon be damned.

Love was hell, and I was in it.

It was the most perfect kind of torture I’d ever known.

DON

For the whole of the memory, our kiss didn't break.
I let myself enjoy it.

When it came to kissing Bea, enjoying myself was as easy as breathing air.

When she came back to me, she came gasping and clutching at my chest like she was desperate for something to hold onto. Her lips moved greedily against mine, like she was starving for something only I could provide.

I let myself enjoy that too. Just for a few seconds, until I heard her moan my name.

"Don..." she rasped against my mouth, her voice breathy and full of need. "Don, please..."

My jaw clenched. My cock stiffened. And inside my chest, something truly monstrous began to stir.

Carefully, I uncurled her fingers from the collar of my shirt and forced myself to pull my lips away from hers.

Any more of *that*, and I wasn't sure I was going to be able to control myself anymore.

Even a demon trying to be a good man had his limits. When she begged for me—that was mine.

"Don," she whimpered as her eyes fluttered open again.

She looked heartbroken that I'd pulled away. Like I'd taken something from her that she desperately wanted.

I could empathize. I knew the feeling well.

It was the same way I'd felt when the angels had stolen her memories away.

"You're all right, Bea." I kept her hand held in mine and gave it a squeeze. "You're back now. Did you remember?"

It was obvious that she had.

I just wanted to hear it from those pretty lips of hers.

"Of course I did."

To her credit, she sobered up quickly. She slipped her hand out of my grasp and moved it back to the sheets she'd been clutching. They'd fallen to her hips while she'd been busy kissing me.

As she hauled the sheets back up over her body, my gaze lingered on the way her breasts filled out her white lace bra. She could hardly blame me for it, either.

They were the loveliest pair of tits I'd ever known.

"Did you want to keep going?" I offered. "I could give you more memories of our past like that...or we could make new ones, if you'd prefer."

"That was plenty, thank you," she said curtly. Her cheeks were flushed a pretty, dusky pink. Same color as her nipples were, I recalled.

Same color as her cunt as well.

"Are you sure?" I smirked. "*Don, please*, you just begged me... I can imagine what you might have been asking for."

"That was a mistake," she said firmly. "I didn't mean to do that."

"Didn't you?" I chuckled. "You certainly sounded desperate in the moment."

"I was confused."

"No." I reached up and brushed her hair behind her ear. Even her earlobes were burning pink now. "You wanted me. Admit it."

"I *thought* I wanted you," she corrected me with a scowl. She swatted my hand away. "I don't even know if that memory was real or not."

"No? Not convincing enough for you?"

"Oh, it was convincing," Bea assured me. Her hips shifted, a telltale sign of undeniable slickness between her thighs, as she licked her lips. "But believable? I'm not so sure about that."

“I agree,” I said with a smirk. “Fucking you is always unbelievable. Always has been.”

“I don’t mean the sex.” Bea glowered. She looked eager to change the subject. “I meant all the rest. Demons attacking me—I can buy that. I saw that firsthand. Angels, though—why would they have wanted to hurt me? I was under the impression they were the good guys.”

“Sometimes, they are. Other times, not so much.” Explaining the complexities of celestial politics to Bea would have taken hours, if not days. I knew I’d need to summarize. “They were after you because they were trying to use you to get to someone who cared about you. Someone else you’ve been forced to forget.”

“Someone other than you?” Bea’s scowl softened into a frown. “How many people have I forgotten?”

“A handful,” I admitted. “Just the ones that connected you to Hell.”

“Why?” Bea asked. “Why steal all of that away from me? What did the angels have to gain by taking it?”

I sighed. Another big question. “The balance between Heaven, Hell and Earth is fragile right now. We’re not dealing with good and evil. Not as you know it. The angels seek to keep order. Your ties to me—to Hell—threatened to disrupt that.”

“So, they’re not the bad guys, then?”

“Honestly, darling...” I rose from the bed. “Given what happened at our wedding last night, it’s harder than ever to say who the good guys are anymore.”

“Certainly not you *demons*,” Bea said firmly. “It was demons that attacked me last night. Not angels. I know exactly who the bad guys are—and you play for their team.”

“A demon saved you as well, you’ll recall.”

“A *demon* that might be lying to me,” said Bea. “Isn’t that what demons do? Give people false memories, put bad thoughts in their heads... possess them?”

“I do love possessing humans,” I admitted. In front of the mirror in the corner, I started fixing my hair into place before it dried wild and askew. “One human in particular, actually.”

“Ha ha.” In the mirror, I could see Bea’s lack of amusement at my little joke. Even when she was annoyed, she was too fucking cute. “Yes, I’m sure you *adore* possessing me.”

“I do,” I agreed. “You’re a very exciting thing to own.”

“Only, you don’t own me.” Bea crossed her arms over her ribs and leaned forward, speaking to me through the mirror. “That memory was cute, Don. Hot, even. But I don’t believe it. No one owns me. Not you. Not anyone.”

“Is that so?” I took a jar of pomade and worked a small amount of it into my hair to keep it in place.

“You hardly even know me.” She said it like it was some kind of *gotcha*.

It only made me grin.

Slowly, I turned to face her.

“I don’t know you?” I moved the last of my stray strands of hair back into place. “Oh, Bea. You have no idea.”

“Don’t I?”

“Not in the least.”

“Tell me something I would have only told a man that I loved, then.” She turned her chin up at me. A challenge.

I’d never met a challenge I wasn’t willing to rise to.

“All right.” I walked back toward her with careful, measured steps. “Let’s start with your dreams. You don’t normally tell those to anyone, do you?”

“I don’t,” Bea said. “But I already told you I didn’t dream last night.”

“I’m not talking about last night.” In truth, a dreamless sleep was a rare thing for Bea. It would be difficult to just choose a handful to recount for her. How could I, when I knew them all? “You have a recurring nightmare of being lost in an office building. Sometimes, it’s the rose garden at your father’s estate.” I paused. “Sometimes, you know you’re being chased by someone. Usually, Simon. Sometimes, someone else—a tall, dark entity with cold eyes. When it catches you, you always ask what it wants, and it only laughs. It never says.”

“I...I bet lots of people have dreams like that.” Bea turned her face away from me. “Lucky guess.”

“Was it?” I shrugged. “All right. How about your faith?”

She scoffed. “And what would a demon know about faith?”

“Plenty. I’m part of it, after all.” I took another step closer. “As a child, you used to wake up in the middle of the night with that same dark entity watching over from the corner of your room as you slept. It terrified you.

You never had reason to believe in angels, but demons—those always seemed a little more real to you than you would've liked."

"That was you, I suppose." Her glare was trained on me again. "Watching me while I slept?"

"Not me," I assured her. Ever since she first told me of that memory, I'd often wondered who that entity was. Now, knowing the identity of Simon's father and the kind of friends Simon must have had in Hell, the possibilities were numerous. "I didn't meet you until a few years ago. It's not easy to make you blush like you are now, but I've always had a knack for it. Fear is the last thing I've ever wanted to stir in you."

"I suppose that's true, at least," Bea grumbled. "Then how *did* we meet?"

"We were in the Inferno. It's a gateway between Hell and Earth on the Las Vegas Strip." I smiled as I sat down on the bed near her again. "You offered me your chair. Sweet of you, really—but a gentleman doesn't leave a lady standing while he sits."

"A chair?" Bea snorted. "We met over a *chair*?"

"We met over a chair," I repeated. "And I made you blush for the first time when I pulled you into my lap."

"Into your *lap*." Bea's voice was incredulous. "Smooth of you."

"I thought so. You seemed to agree."

"That doesn't sound like me, though." She leveled her gaze at me again. "That's how I know you're lying. I would have thought you were just another arrogant, overconfident asshole laying claim to things that don't belong to him. Nothing more."

"And you did. Initially, I imagine you thought I was quite the prick." My smile grew wider and more wicked. I lowered my voice to a whisper and leaned in. "But I also know those are exactly the kind of men you like to think about when you slip those pretty fingers of yours between your pretty thighs at night."

Bea's eyes narrowed in an instant.

"I've never told anyone that," she hissed.

"And yet, I know it."

She was right, in a way.

She'd never told anyone but me.

"You're...you're reading my mind." Her gaze was made of an exquisite mixture of pure embarrassment and unadulterated hate. "You're

playing tricks on me. Fucking around with my head and doing...”

“Doing what?” My lips curled into an amused smile. “Stealing your heart?”

“Demon shit,” she snapped at me. “That’s all any of this is.”

My smile endured.

Demon shit. She was cute, but she had no fucking clue.

“I don’t have the power to read your mind, cupcake. But nice try.” I patted her cheek. “The fact of the matter is I don’t need to, either.”

“Or so you claim.” She swatted my hand away.

“Not claim. *Know.*” I caught her wrist and held it tight, tugging her toward me. Once my gaze locked on hers and we were close like this with her temper flaring up, I knew she would be too lost in my eyes to be able to look away. “I know your favorite color is mustard yellow, and I know you wish it had a more romantic name. I know the smell of roses makes you think of how long forever might be. I know you’ve got a scar on your knee from climbing an olive tree when you were a child.” I ran my hand over her leg, tracing exactly the place where I knew that scar was hidden. “You fell out trying to reach the top. It didn’t stop bleeding for an entire day.”

“More mind reading,” she whispered, but she no longer sounded so sure.

“No. And I don’t have to read your mind to know how wet that memory made you,” I purred against her ear, then breathed in her scent. Hot and heady and delicious. “I can smell it on you. The scent of a perfectly soaked cunt.”

Her next breath was a ragged one. “You’re lying.”

“I’m not.” I released her wrist and rose again. “You can’t hide from me, Bea. You don’t have any little secrets where I’m concerned. You’ve already told me every last one.”

“You’re a bastard,” she snapped at me as I walked toward the door.

“So I’ve been told.” I snapped my fingers in return. I didn’t look back. I didn’t have to. This was my domain, and what happened here was entirely under my control. Including but not limited to syrup-drenched French toast with fresh berries and hot coffee appearing in bed next to Bea on an elegant tray.

“Aah!” A soft sound of surprise came from behind me as Bea noticed the meal that had just sprung into existence next to her. “How did you—”

I glanced over my shoulder at her, smirking at the suspicion with which she regarded the tray. "Demonic magic, Bea. If seeing is believing, then I'm going to keep showing you things until you can accept that they're real. Now. Eat your breakfast like a good girl. Maybe get some more rest. You've certainly earned it."

"Okay," Bea said slowly. "And after that? What then?"

In the doorway, I paused. Bea had painted the entire bedroom in color with her presence. But beyond it, the world was colorless once more.

Further proof of how much I needed her by my side.

Without her, my life was just black, white and gray.

"Come find me," I said over my shoulder. "I'll be in the first place you look."

BEA

He left me there in his bed with a cup of coffee and a plate of French toast. They'd both appeared by my side out of thin air when he snapped.

As of yesterday, that would have left me stunned. It was a magic trick my brain couldn't comprehend.

But in such a short amount of time, Don had opened my eyes to so many things. The existence of Heaven and Hell, for example. Memories of angels trying to kill me. The reality of demons who wanted me dead.

By comparison, magic French toast was pretty tame.

I sighed and pulled the tray over onto my lap.

I was hungry, and Don had been kind enough to make me breakfast.

It didn't matter so much that I had no idea how he'd done it.

I had bigger things to puzzle out now.

The French toast was perfect. The powdered sugar that dusted its crispy surface melted on my tongue as I took a bite. Ripe blueberries burst with sweetness between my teeth and the soft, syrup-soaked center of the toast was still chewy and warm.

I ate it all so fast, I might as well have inhaled it. As for the coffee—it was dark and rich enough, it must have come from Hell itself. There wasn't any cream or sugar on the tray to go with it, but here in Don's domain, my palate didn't seem to mind the fact that it was black as sin.

The food was a kindness. Having a full stomach and a little caffeine in me was almost enough to distract me from the other hunger that Don had left me with.

I knew I shouldn't sleep with him. Even in that memory, I'd been terrified of falling for Don. And if my hunch in that forgotten past was correct, sex with a demon was a gateway drug.

I'd been falling for him in that memory. I'd said I *loved* him—and I'd meant it too.

If I let him have me again—if it had even been real at all—who was to say I wouldn't start falling for him again now?

Sex was one thing. Being in love was something else entirely.

But the reality of my situation was also worth taking into account.

Don said that consummating our marriage would help keep me safe so I could return to Earth someday. I didn't want to go back unprotected. I didn't think Don would let me, either.

My choices were clear: I could either give Don my body and risk losing my heart to him as well, or I could deny him and risk losing my life.

Either because I was stuck here in the Abyss forever as his captive, or because without his protection, it was only a matter of time before some other demon assassin came along to slit my throat.

I was still mulling it over by the time my coffee cup was empty and my plate was clean. I thought about it in the shower as the hot water and steam rolled over my skin. I thought about it as I searched the wardrobe for something to wear that wasn't my wedding dress. I wasn't eager to slip back into it, and I couldn't exactly prance around Don's mansion wearing nothing but my lingerie.

Unless I decided to give in to him and let him fuck me.

That path was sure to be a slippery slope. If I gave myself Don, I was pretty sure it would only be a matter of time before we were both running around the place wearing nothing at all.

And as fun as that would be...

I clenched my jaw and rose from the bed.

It was high time I got some clothes on.

To my surprise, in the wardrobe I found clothes that looked like they belonged to me. Pretty sundresses that were exactly my size. Sandals that looked like they'd been made to fit my feet. I couldn't find any labels on

them, which was strange—back on Earth, I dressed exclusively in the wares of up-and-coming designers. These, I couldn't really place.

But when I pressed the skirt of a mustard yellow sundress to my nose... Maybe I was imagining it, but I could smell the ghost of my favorite perfume beneath the light scent of fresh laundry soap. Jasmine and vanilla and roses.

These clothes even smelled like me. Like I'd worn them before. When I pulled the dress on, it cupped my breasts so perfectly, I didn't even need to wear a bra beneath it.

Maybe I'd left them here in one of those memories that, according to Don, an army of angels had made me forget.

I WANDERED around the room for a little while, studying every little detail. The flowers were beautiful, the furniture was tastefully elegant, and the bed was so comfy that when I threw myself back down into it, it was hard to convince myself to get back up.

None of it stirred any more memories for me, unfortunately. Whatever the angels had done to my mind, they'd locked everything up in a way only Don seemed capable of revealing to me.

It made me suspicious. Of course it did.

If only Don could unlock my memories, then it supported my theory that they might all be lies.

There was just one problem: it had felt real. All of it. The ache in my body from the fight he'd saved me from. The soaking wet ache in my cunt that had lingered, even after the memory was gone.

That *I love you*—that felt the most real of all.

I'd come back to reality clutching at him, begging and whimpering and pleading with him.

I'd been desperate to go back.

My chest swelled with breath, then a heavy sigh left my lips.

My life had been a hell of a lot easier when I'd been resigned to marrying Simon and living out the rest of my days in a loveless marriage. That much was damn sure.

Being married to Don, on the other hand...

It was more interesting, at least.

More dangerous, too.

“What the fuck have I gotten myself into?” I asked the empty coffee cup I’d left on the nightstand.

It didn’t answer me. I didn’t know why I’d expected it to.

This wasn’t *Beauty and the Beast*, after all. There’d be no horny talking candlesticks or coquettish French feather dusters to keep me company here.

Just little ol’ me and the handsome, ravenous demon who’d made me his wife last night.

This was no Disney movie.

This was Hell.

Back on Earth, everyone thought that I was away on my honeymoon with Simon. That meant I had a few weeks to spare before I made any serious decisions about whether or not fucking Don was worth the protection a fully consummated marriage might give me.

But given the way Don looked, and the way he made my body feel, and the way he left my pussy throbbing and soaked every time he so much as spoke to me...

I was worried that if I didn’t make up my mind soon, I wouldn’t last for more than a few days before my body made the decision for me.

I wanted him, and he wanted me.

If it was inevitable...why deny myself? Why wait?

I’d fallen for him once. Would falling for him all over again really be so bad?

I clutched a pillow to my chest and closed my eyes, imagining his hands running up and down my legs again. Not over the sheets this time, but under them. His fingers against my bare skin.

Maybe it would be nice.

Fuck. I *knew* it would be nice.

But Don had suggested that I should get some more rest.

Maybe that wasn’t the worst idea, come to think.

Maybe some more sleep would help me clear my mind before I made it up.

I didn’t know how long I slept for. Only that, once again, I didn’t dream. When I woke up again, it was to the sound of a dull, periodic thumping sound from outside.

It sounded like someone was chopping wood.

I pulled myself up out of bed and wandered to a set of tall doors where the sun was shining in. They opened to a white marble balcony. Its railing was wound with gray flowers on dark gray vines.

When I stepped out onto it, something strange happened to the flowers, though. They changed from gray to purple right before my very eyes. Like an invisible artist had just colored them in for me. The vines turned dark green and the marble beneath my bare feet became streaked with thin veins of gold.

I rubbed my eyes, certain that this was some kind of hangover effect from last night's champagne, or maybe just a trick of the light.

But when I pulled my hands away and blinked at my surroundings, I realized it was no trick.

At least, not any that I'd ever seen before.

The sky was gray outside. The clouds were, too. The sunshine wasn't golden anymore; instead, it was wan and white. The grass was gray, and the trees were gray, and the shadows were dark gray except for where they were black.

It was like I'd walked out of Don's bedroom and into a world completely without color. Beyond the balcony, an otherwise beautiful landscape was rendered bleak and hollow, like a black-and-white photograph turned into real life.

Thwack!

I approached the railing of the balcony as I heard the sound again. My eyes searched for its source.

When I found it, my heart flipped over in my chest.

Below, near the tree line beyond a gorgeous-but-colorless garden, Don was rendered in black-and-white as well. He'd taken off his shirt and left it lying on the dove gray grass.

His muscles rippled as he hoisted an axe up over his head and brought it down on a thick piece of wood he'd positioned on top of a tree stump. The log fractured where the axe's blade hit, but the split didn't go all the way through.

With a focused elegance, Don braced the log with one foot and pulled the axe back out of it. Taking the log between his hands, he finished splitting it by pulling it apart at its seam.

Then, he tossed the freshly chopped wood onto a pile nearby and moved to position the next log on the stump so he could start all over

again.

Fuck. Nearly every man I'd ever known had a trust fund and a general aversion to hard labor. The only calluses on their hands were made in the gym, and they usually got those filed down when they went in for their regular manicures and pedicures. Once upon a time, it had made me feel safe.

I didn't have to worry about men like that—or so I'd thought. Even if I couldn't take them in a fight, I always knew that Joan could. If Simon had ever so much as raised a hand to me, Joan would have snapped each and every one of his fingers off for even considering it.

Don, on the other hand, was strong enough that even hordes of brainwashed humans and demon assassins didn't faze him.

My life isn't worth as much as yours, he'd told me in that memory. I'd been furious with him for it at the time. I'd known good and well that he'd go get himself killed if it meant that I was safe.

In our vows yesterday, he'd promised me the protection of his body—and what a body it was.

Fuck.

I believed him.

I believed all of it.

I'd loved him, once upon a time.

And in that instant, watching Don split wood beneath the heat of a pale gray sun, I knew I was going to sleep with him.

Not just because he was handsome and strong. Not just because it would help strengthen his ability to protect me from all the forces in the universe that wanted me dead.

Not even just because he chopped wood like he was some kind of rugged part-mountain man, part-demon, part-machine.

No. I was going to sleep with him because I fucking wanted to. Needed to. My body was screaming at me to jump over the balcony and go climb him like a fucking tree.

He loved me. He wanted to protect me. He'd give his life to keep me safe and he did it all looking like *that*.

He wanted me. He'd offered himself to me. Not just part of himself, but all of him. Every inch. Everything he was.

Demon. Husband. King of Hell.

All things considered, with an offer like that on the table, I'd be braindead not to take him up on it.

I watched him work through an entire pile of logs until they were all split down into manageable pieces. It was thrilling, in a way.

Don knew so much about me, and I knew so little about him still. It was exciting to be the one who was watching for a change, instead of the one who was being watched.

"You should come down and join me when you're feeling up for it," Don called out over his shoulder as he began to pile the split logs into a neat pyramid. "When you're done staring at me, that is."

My mouth fell open.

An audible gasp left my lips.

Okay, then. Maybe I hadn't been as sneaky as I'd originally thought.

Bastard.

"How long did you know I was standing here?" I called down to him.

He grinned up at me with a black-and-white smile. Even without color, somehow it was even brighter than the sun.

"Oh, the entire time. The Abyss is mine, remember. Not much happens here that I don't know about." He chuckled to himself. "Including peeping wives."

"And why didn't you say anything?" He was incorrigible. Impossible. Literally the worst.

He brought the axe down once more, burying its blade in the stump, mopped his hand across his brow, and shrugged.

"I thought you might like to watch." He held his hand up to me and beckoned. "Now. Come here."

I licked my lips and glanced at the staircase that descended from the balcony down into the garden.

I still didn't have shoes on. Or makeup, for that matter.

But Don's voice was commanding, and the grass below looked soft enough, even if it was gray.

"Okay," I called back to him.

Then, I headed down the stairs.

He'd asked—and for once, I was too in awe of him to fight him.

All I could do was obey.

BEA

“Nice dress,” Don said as I met him by his log pile. He certainly had a way of handling wood. “Looks good on you.”

“Nice shirt,” I said, nodding to the place where he’d left it on the grass.

Looks good off of you, I didn’t need to add.

Don laughed, then went to fetch it. He was in color once more, now that I was close. Everything near me was. It was like a little bubble of vibrancy surrounded me everywhere I went here.

“Did you get some more rest?” Don asked, slinging the shirt over his shoulder. Beneath it, his chest glistened with sweat.

“I did,” I said. Then, without thinking, I added. “Maybe you should have joined me.”

He arched an eyebrow. “Would you have liked me to?”

Idiot. I’d only meant that he must have been tired now, after all of that axe-swinging.

I hadn’t meant it as an invitation.

Had I?

I brushed my hair behind my ear, feeling suddenly self-conscious. Things were almost easier when Don was hitting on me or I was accusing him of lying.

Arguing with Don made it easier to deny my attraction to him. Talking to him now, like two normal people—or, as normal as a demon king and

his stolen bride could possibly be—made me feel uncannily shy. Like a schoolgirl talking to her crush.

“Maybe,” I admitted. “You probably needed it more than I did. You went to bed after me last night, and this morning, you were awake before I opened my eyes.”

“I don’t need much.” He held out his hand to me. “Come on. I want to show you something.”

I hesitated for only a moment.

Then, I took his hand and followed where he led.

The bubble of color came with us. It encapsulated our bodies, turning the grass from gray to green as we walked along.

“What happened to the rest of the color here?” I asked, curious. “Does all of Hell look like an old black and white movie?”

“Just the Abyss,” Don said. “It’s always been like this—except for when you’re here, of course.”

“Why do I change it?” Not that I was complaining—an entire realm without color seemed like an incredibly boring place to live.

Don chuckled and glanced over his shoulder at me. “I think you know the answer to that one, Bea. Take a wild guess.”

I licked my lips but didn’t say anything in return.

Don was right. I did have one suspicion.

Because you love me.

Just like he’d said in that memory.

It was a suspicion that, for the moment, I would keep to myself.

Don led me down the gentle slope of a small hill to a broad gray pool. The grass was cool and soft beneath my feet, still damp with morning dew even though it must have been well past noon.

A weeping willow tree hung over the water. The fringe of its pale gray leaves turned to green as we approached. The surface of pond shifted to a lovely, deep blue.

Beneath the tree on the water’s edge, a white sheet had been laid out. On the sheet, a picnic lunch had been prepared. A golden baguette rested on a wooden cutting board next to a little mason jar of deep purple jam and a wheel of brie. Frosted red grapes and pink apples were scattered around a second board of small pastries and tea cakes. A bottle of rested wine sat in the midst of it all with two glasses—one for me, one for him.

My stomach growled as I took it all in. Loud enough that Don could hear it, apparently.

“Good. You’re hungry.” His hand brushed against my shoulder as he helped me lower myself to sit on the sheet’s edge.

“I guess so,” I admitted. “I don’t know why. It feels like I just had breakfast.”

A breakfast that Don had summoned with just a snap of his fingers. My mind was still boggling a little over how he’d managed it.

Probably, I knew the answer to that one too, though.

More demon shit.

“Breakfast was hours ago.” Don sat down behind me. The scent of his sweat, salty and masculine, flowed around him like a delicious, earthy cologne. “You slept straight through lunch.”

“Did your servants prepare this for us, then?” If Don was a king of Hell, it would only make sense that he had a fleet of butlers and maids to wait on him hand and foot. The notion didn’t exactly bother me, but having grown up with plenty of servants myself, it was far from ideal.

I hadn’t seen anyone else here other than Don so far. It reminded me of growing up at my family’s estate a little *too* much. My father had always said that good help was invisible: not seen, not heard, but always there. I’d never known who was watching me or listening in on my conversations until it was far too late.

It begged the question: who might be watching us now?

But to my surprise, over my shoulder, Don shook his head as he reached for a grape.

“I don’t keep servants here,” he said. “Never enjoyed being fussed over. And besides, there was never any need.”

He popped the grape into his mouth, then snapped his fingers. Another grape appeared between them, like he’d conjured it from thin air.

My stomach growled again as he offered it to me.

I was no Persephone, and it was no pomegranate seed...but I was a little wary of it anyway. Historically speaking, women got in an awful lot of trouble accepting mysterious fruits from devils.

But then again, I’d already eaten the breakfast Don had left for me.

Compared to all that French toast I’d wolfed down earlier, a single grape surely couldn’t hurt.

“So, you just will everything you want into existence here?” I asked, keeping my eyes trained on the grape between his fingers.

“Essentially, yes.” Don pressed the grape to my lips. I opened my mouth and he slipped it onto my tongue. The grape burst with sweet juices between my teeth as I chewed. *Delicious*. “Almost everything, anyway.”

I swallowed. “What do you mean?”

“Food, wine, pretty flowers, books—breakfast in bed—” Don reached for the baguette and pulled it apart with his fingers. The crust crackled as it came apart, revealing a fluffy white center. “All of those things can be created here, yes.”

“Then what can’t you conjure with a snap of your fingers?” I asked.

“Isn’t it obvious?” Don took a small knife from the cutting board and used it to smear a bite of baguette with jam. This, too, he offered to my lips. “I can’t conjure you.”

I took the bite and chewed slowly. It hadn’t even occurred to me that Don might have tried to will me into existence in this place.

It was a good thing, I decided.

I didn’t like the idea of a false version of myself wandering around here.

With Don around, I could imagine exactly the kind of trouble a carbon copy of me might get up to.

“Bet you say that to all the other girls too,” I said with a breath of a laugh.

“What others?”

“Don.” I narrowed my eyes at him. “I’m not so naive to think I’m the only woman who’s ever been in your life.”

“There was one other, yes,” Don admitted.

I arched a brow. “Should I be jealous?”

“She lived and died something like eight hundred years ago, so...” Don met my gaze with a challenge of a glint in his eyes. “You tell me.”

It was hard to imagine Don only having one other woman in his life. He exuded a playboy energy that made me feel like he probably spent most of his time partying with models and starlets on luxury yachts, not pining after the same woman for eight hundred years.

But instead of being overcome with rampant jealousy, my heart only panged for him.

“You must get lonely here all on your own.” I tore off a piece of the baguette as well, smeared it with jam like Don had, and offered it to him over my shoulder. His lips brushed against my fingertips as he took it into his mouth. The ghost of a kiss. “No color, no servants, no other women—it seems like a lonely kind of place.”

“I like the solitude,” Don said after he’d chewed and swallowed. He lay down on his side, half-curved around me, propped up on one elbow. “Helps me think. And besides—it’s never lonely here when you’re around.”

That confirmed it, then.

He’d brought me here before, sometime in my lost memories.

The dress that I wore and all those others I’d found in the wardrobe—those were mine.

He’d probably snapped them into existence for me as well.

“If you can just make things happen with a snap of your fingers, you hardly needed to chop all of that wood, you know,” I pointed out as we continued to trade bites. Don fed me bits of brie from his fingers, and I fed him grapes from mine.

“I could have, I suppose,” he allowed. “But it would have robbed you of such an excellent view.” He chuckled. “Anyway, I like doing work. It’s meditative. Does the body good.”

I couldn’t argue with that. Don had quite the body—and every inch of it looked perfectly suited for swinging axes and splitting wood.

I turned my body to face his, lying on my side as well. “I still have a lot of questions, Don.”

“You always do.” He shifted closer to me and reached for an apple. With another knife, he turned the fruit in his hand as he carefully began removing its peel. “Where should we start?”

“With that demon assassin, I suppose.” I watched the apple’s peel curl and fall away at the edge of Don’s knife. “How do we know there will be more of them? Maybe that was the only one.”

“There will always be more,” he said with certainty. “Deals with demons are like deals with the mob. Once there’s a price on your head, the hunt doesn’t stop—until it does.”

“Until I’m dead?”

“Exactly,” said Don. I swallowed. That was a harrowing thought. “But I’m not going to let that happen. For as long as you’re here, you’re safe.”

You don't need to worry about anything harming you in this place. The Abyss will protect you—and so will I.”

I knew he would, too. Don had already proven that well enough. Once at the wedding, again in that memory he'd given me.

All those muscles of his were good for far more than just chopping wood.

“And you're sure that Simon is behind this...hellish hit that's been taken out on me?” It was still a little difficult to believe Simon Roth was capable of something like that. I'd known him my entire life. Simon was arrogant, petulant, prone to temper tantrums when he didn't get his way. He had no shortage of negative traits.

But murderous?

Frankly, I didn't think he had that kind of ambition in him.

But Don certainly seemed sure that, somehow, Simon was involved.

“I heard him in the garden beneath your balcony a few hours before the wedding was supposed to start,” Don said. With the apple half-peeled, he cut off a sliver and held it out for me. I took it. “He was talking with someone. A demon. I couldn't see who, but the voice seemed familiar. Prattling on about how you didn't love him, and that he couldn't control you.”

I laughed. “Well, those are both true, at least. I'm not an easy woman to control.”

“No, you're not,” Don agreed. His lips curled into a slow smirk as his eyes met mine. “Makes it even more satisfying when you finally let your guard down and obey.”

My heart leapt up in my chest at his words.

Obedying Don would be a satisfying thing indeed. I'd learned that from my memory as well.

The only things he'd asked of me in that memory were things that I'd needed. Things I'd desperately wanted to give him—he'd only needed to say the word.

“But Simon's known for a long time that I don't love him.” I bit into my slice of apple and chewed on it for a few moments, mulling over Simon's motives. “Why go making deals with demons to get me out of the way now?”

“Because he's a greedy, spoiled bastard, I imagine.” Don's eyes darkened as he looked away. “Some men can't stomach the idea of having

a wife they can't control."

"And what were *you* doing, sneaking around beneath my balcony yesterday?" I asked. "You were hardly on the guest list, as I recall."

"Watching over you, of course."

I snorted. "You say that like it's a normal thing, stalking your ex on her wedding day to make sure she doesn't get into trouble."

"You have a particular knack for getting into trouble," Don said. "And I hardly consider you my ex. Just because you'd forgotten me doesn't mean I'd forgotten you."

If Don had been anyone else, that probably would have creeped me out. But he wasn't anyone else—he was *him*. A man I'd loved once in a memory that had been stolen from me.

A man who I knew loved me still. Even if he hadn't said it out loud, I could feel it. Like being wrapped up in a warm coat on a cold night by unseen hands.

"Did you miss me when I was—" *When I was taken away from you*, I almost said. But that seemed a little dramatic. I almost laughed. Melodrama wasn't really my thing. "Never mind. Forget that I asked."

"Why?" Don moved closer still. He placed the knife aside. "You can ask me anything you like."

"It's a silly question." I shrugged. "It doesn't matter."

"It does," Don said. His eyes were focused and serious. "It's only silly because the answer is so obvious."

I found myself smiling shyly. "Tell me anyway?"

"Of course I missed you, Bea. Every fucking day. When I lost you, I lost part of my soul." He reached up and trailed the backs of his fingers along the neckline of my dress. My skin turned to goosebumps everywhere he touched. "And now you're back to me. You're mine. I'll be damned if I ever let anyone take you away again."

"Aren't you already damned?" I teased. "Abaddon, King of Hell."

"Once damned is fine," Don said with a small laugh. "I was born that way. Twice, though—if I'm to be damned again, it'll be on my own terms."

Don's hand fell away from my skin. He took a bite of the apple and smirked as he chewed.

My smile broadened as I watched him.

Don struck me as exactly the kind of man who lived life on no one's terms but his own.

I liked that about him, I realized.

Maybe even a little too much.

We ate in silence for a little longer. Every time I caught myself staring at him, he raised his eyes to me as well and I made myself look away.

To be fair, he was hard not to stare at. His dark hair was glossy and thick. His lips were enchanting. I even liked the way he ate—with an intense pleasure. Relishing every bite.

But unfortunately, I still had one question for Don. At least, for now.

I bit my lip. It was a question I should have asked Don the moment I realized that he'd taken Simon's place yesterday.

If I'd actually cared about Simon and his well-being, I supposed I would have. It was telling that it had taken me this long to bother with it.

Simon wanted me dead, and I didn't love him at all.

"What did you do with him?" The *him* seemed obvious. I wasn't exactly talking about the Prince of Wales here. "When you caught him in the garden, planning my death—"

"I didn't kill him, if that's what you're asking."

"That's...good. Thank you." Admittedly, the thought had crossed my mind.

Don may have been handsome, but I'd seen him fight. In battle, he was vicious and brutal. Practically unhinged.

I still hadn't forgotten the way he'd swung that axe earlier, either.

"Don't thank me yet, Bea." Don shook his head as a look of disgust flashed across his eyes. "I still might."

"You're keeping him somewhere, then," I guessed. My chest felt tense and tight. "If you're planning on murdering him, why wait?"

"Do you want me to kill him? I can." I believed him. "Say the word, and I will."

"I...don't think so." Simon probably deserved it, honestly. But something in my heart didn't like that idea. "Who am I to go around ordering men's deaths?"

"He didn't hesitate to order yours."

Don had a point.

"I'm not like him," I said softly, looking away. "I don't want to be like him."

"I've killed men before. Demons, too. Yesterday, you saw that with your own eyes," Don reminded me. "Is it him you don't want to be like, or is it me?"

"You aren't like Simon at all." He wasn't. I didn't think for a second that Don and Simon were alike in the least. "That demon would have killed me if you hadn't finished him off first."

"He wanted to kill you because of Simon's word." Don scoffed. "I'm keeping your idiot fiancé alive for the moment, Bea. He's in the Abyss awaiting questioning. I need to know who he made his deal with and what the terms were. But once I have everything I need from him—well." Don's gaze flashed toward his knife. "You reap what you sow."

Tentatively, I reached out to Don. He stiffened as I touched my fingertips to his cheek, turning his gaze away from the knife.

"I know Simon's done wrong. I know he wanted me dead," I told Don. "But I don't want his blood on your hands. He's not worth it."

"I'm a demon, Bea," Don rasped. His brow furrowed and his jaw clenched as he stared up at me. "I've had blood on my hands for millennia. I'm not bothered by the notion of more."

"You don't need to get your hands dirty again," I whispered. "Not for him. You said so yourself—he can't hurt me here."

"No, he can't. But I have no intention of keeping him here—and I'm sure as hell not letting him go." Don's eyes flashed like a blade. "Maybe I want to get my hands dirty. He put you in danger. He deserves to die."

"Don't," I asked him softly, cupping his cheek in my hand. He turned his gaze away. "Please. For me?"

Don was right—Simon really did deserve whatever he got. Even if it was death at Don's capable, bloody hands.

But I still remembered the little boy who'd played tea party with me when we were children. I still recalled the Simon that pouted furiously when he lost at board games and cried when he scraped his knees.

Simon was far from a child anymore, but for a long time, we'd been something akin to friends. Or so I'd thought.

Even if he'd turned into a bastard of an adult, somewhere in my memory, he'd always be that same fragile, delicate child.

Even if now, he wanted me dead.

I didn't have to stoop to his level.

And neither did Don.

“All right,” Don said after a long moment. His gray eyes glinted darkly as they flicked up to meet mine. “But if I’m going to behave myself for you, I think I deserve something in return.”

“Of course,” I said—then nearly kicked myself for it. I’d said yes before I’d even bothered asking him what I was agreeing to. “What do you want?”

Faintly, Don smiled up at me for a moment. A more wicked smile, I’d never known.

Then, he moved. Impossibly fast. Incredibly strong. By the time I realized what he was doing, he’d already taken my shoulder in his hands and pressed me down on the sheet beneath us. His fingers wound around my wrists, pinning me by them as his hips shifted between my thighs and his body moved over mine.

I drew in a breath. It was just short of a gasp.

Slowly now, so I could anticipate his every motion, he lifted my wrists together above my head so he could hold them there with only one hand.

With the other, he reached down beneath my skirt and began trailing his fingertips up my inner thigh.

“I think you know exactly what I want, Bea.” His voice was a low growl. His eyes were full of sin.

I rolled my lower lip beneath my tongue and held my breath as his hand moved further up my thigh.

I did.

I wanted it too.

BEA

“No,” Don said as I reached down to adjust my skirt. He took my hand in his and moved my fingers aside. “None of that. I’m going to have you, Bea, and you’re going to lie back and enjoy being taken. Understand?”

I opened my mouth to argue with him but found that I had nothing to argue about.

My cunt was throbbing. Already, warmth and wetness were pooling at the entrance of my slit.

Don would realize that soon enough. If he hadn’t guessed it already.

Just like, if he reached far enough up my skirt, he’d realize that I hadn’t put on any panties beneath this sundress.

I could tell him that this was wrong, trading my body for Simon’s life. Maybe it was. I could tell him that I didn’t want this—but that would be a lie.

Not even a good one.

“I understand,” I said softly, meeting his eyes. “I’ll be good.”

I’d never thought of myself as the shy and obedient type, but Don had a way of bringing out sides of me that even I barely knew.

“Glad to hear it, kitten.” Don’s fingers curled around one of my knees, pulling it to the side. “You don’t want to find out what I’ll do to you if you change your mind.”

I bit my lip.

Actually, I suspected Don had every idea *exactly* how bad I wanted to find that out.

He knew, or he wouldn't have said it.

Bastard.

I knew he could be rough with me if he wanted. After that memory he'd shown me earlier, I wasn't about to forget that any time soon. But his current gentleness—the menacing, barely contained anger he had toward Simon bristling through his every muscle as he smoothed his hand up my inner thigh—was just as enticing.

Don had different sides to him too, it would seem.

Each of them more fascinating and delicious than the last.

As Don cupped my inner thigh at the hollow where it met my pussy, he ran his thumb down the soft, dark hair that covered my mons pubis and my knees trembled in response.

“Shh,” Don hushed in my ear. “You don’t need to be afraid of me, Bea. I’m a bad man. A dangerous one, too.”

“You’re a demon,” I whispered back, closing my eyes. My mouth was nearly as wet as my cunt was. Just hearing his voice was making me salivate. “A devil.”

“I am, yes.” He folded his palm over my cunt and squeezed it gently. A shiver of excitement rippled through me at his touch. “But I’m not going to hurt you. Others, yes. Anyone who threatens you, I can’t help but want to kill. You, though...”

His fingers dipped between my folds, stroking in a come-hither motion and gathering wetness.

“I’ll never hurt you, darling.” Don’s breath was humid against the stray locks of hair over my ear. “I’d burn the world down to keep you safe—but I’d die before I ever hurt you.”

I knew this. I understood. Don didn’t scare me, exactly. He’d already proven his willingness to protect me. Once, on the day of our wedding, again in that memory.

“I’m not shaking because I’m afraid, Don.” My eyes flicked open as I turned my face toward his.

“No? Why, then?”

“I’m shaking because I want you.” Slowly, my hips rose and fell, matching the rhythm of his hand between my legs. “I’m shaking because I’m worried that if I have you, there won’t be any turning back.”

A dark chuckle left his lips. The air from it tickled my mouth.

He was close. Too close, and at the same time, nowhere near close enough.

“No, kitten. There won’t be,” Don agreed. “But when your cunt feels this fucking good... why the hell would you ever want to turn back?”

He spread me open with his thumb and index finger. Willingly, I shifted my knees farther apart, giving him more room.

“Please.” My voice was breathy and weak. I’d never heard myself sound more desperate.

“Please what, Bea? Please stop...or please, more?”

“More.” I arched my back, closed my eyes, and gave in. “Please, more.”

He growled, low and dark, as he pressed his middle and index fingers deeper into my folds. I gasped as he entered me, then whimpered. My pussy had been clenching on nothing for our entire conversation so far.

Now, finally, it had something to clench around.

I couldn’t imagine anything that had ever felt so right.

“When I’m done with you, Bea, I’m going to leave you dripping and aching and satisfied.” His fingers slipped in and out of me with measured deliberation. Every time he pushed them back inside me, his fingertips flicked up against my G-spot, earning him another moan. “When I’m done, you can tell yourself that you did this for Simon. That you let me lay claim to you in this small, wicked way to save a man’s life.”

“That’s our deal. Isn’t it?” I clenched my jaw to stop myself from whimpering. Pleasure was unfurling within my core, hot and greedy. As gentle as Don was being now, with every move he made, I could tell exactly how much he was holding back. “To save his life, I’m the price.”

“You’re worth ten of him. A thousand. More.” The tip of Don’s nose nuzzled against my jaw as he shook his head. “But yes. If that’s the story you need to tell yourself to make you feel safe when I’m done with you, then do it. All I ask is that you remember one thing.”

“What?” My gasps were becoming rhythmic and sharper. My hips ached for him. I couldn’t keep them still.

“Later tonight, when you find yourself thinking of this moment—all the fucking pleasure I’m going to send thrumming through this perfect cunt of yours—remember that it doesn’t always have to be this way.” His whisper was growing as ragged as my breaths felt. “Any time you want

me. However you need me—you can have me again. Just like this, and more.” He nipped at my neck, then shifted his lips to brush against mine. When I opened my eyes again, his were glinting with sin. “And when you do come to me—which you will—next time, there won’t be any lie for you to hide behind. Next time...you’ll be all fucking mine.”

He thrust his fingers into me, quick and hard. I cried out in response and he stifled it with a kiss. His tongue wove its way between my lips, massaging my own tongue in the same way he was fingering my cunt. He tasted sweet like grapes and warm like sunshine.

By the time I realized I was kissing him back, I was already too far gone to care.

Electricity flickered through me, humming and thrumming like there was a live wire inside my body, just beneath my skin. Don kissed me and pumped his fingers into me with a gently crescendoing intensity, until the flicker turned into sparks, and the sparks turned into a shock so sudden and violent that my entire body twitched and spasmed beneath his.

“Fucking perfect,” Don snarled against my lips. “Perfect woman. Perfect cunt. Perfectly fucking mine.”

He withdrew his hand from my cunt and moved down between my thighs. Still shaking from the aftershocks of the orgasm, I tilted my head up just in time to watch Don staring down at the honey that clung between his fingers before he sucked them into his mouth and licked them clean.

“Fuck, Bea. You taste too good to be true.” He moved his hand over my throat and shouldered my thighs apart so they were spread even wider. “It’s been too long. Can’t believe I almost forgot.”

His lips curled back with an agonizing need as he lowered his gaze to my pussy, spread and vulnerable and dripping with my own want.

“And you look just as good as you taste, too.” For a moment, his snarl turned into a smile of disbelief.

Then, he plunged his mouth between my legs and lapped at my slit like it was the hottest day in Hell and my pussy was an ice cream cone. Our picnic lunch lay aside, entirely forgotten.

Now, I was the feast.

His wet tongue smoothed against my folds. His saliva mixed with my slickness, mingling together beneath his heat. He kissed my pussy just as passionately as he’d kissed my mouth only a few moments ago.

When he moved his lips to my clit, my eyes widened, and my fingers went to his hair on instinct.

I was throbbing, dripping, desperate for him.

I needed something to hold onto.

What I needed was him.

He sucked my clit into his mouth and trapped it gently between his teeth. His tongue lashed out, flicking rapidly against my swollen bud. His hands wrapped around my hips and squeezed my ass as he pulled me closer to him.

My body flushed with life in return. Yes. I wanted to be closer to him. As close as two people could be—that was what I wanted more than anything.

My hips bucked up against his mouth, rocking rhythmically like ocean waves. Inside me, an even bigger wave was building. It arched and soared toward the heavens, then came crashing down intensely, hard enough to wrack my whole body as it pulled me along with it.

“Perfect,” Don purred through my gasping. Even his breath against my clit was enough to keep pushing the orgasm on. “Beautiful and sweet. Fucking exquisite thing you are.”

He rose up just for long enough to kiss me again. It was a kiss that didn’t last for nearly enough time. When he trailed his kisses back down my body, all the way to my pussy all over again, I found that I could taste myself on my own lips.

He was right.

I was sweet.

“You should spend the rest of the day exploring Nevermore, darling. It’s your home now as much as it is mine.” I almost laughed at how casually he said it. It was such a normal thing to say—and such a strange thing to feel the consonants of those words still vibrating against the lips of my pussy as Don shifted his kisses across it. I was almost pathetically despondent when he finally pulled away. “And while you do, you should consider the benefits of consummating our marriage properly. If you liked that, then you’ll love what comes next when we have more time.”

Consummating our marriage. I knew that Don meant *letting him fuck me like the ravenous demon he was*, but it was more than that, too.

Consummating our marriage would give me all the protections I needed to return to Earth when our honeymoon was over.

It would mean binding myself even more deeply to Don, too.

“And what will you do now?” I asked, still breathless as I propped myself up on my elbows to stare down at him.

Don’s gray eyes were dark, but his smile was darker still.

“Now, I’m going to go deal with your traitor of an ex.” He pressed a final kiss to my knee, then picked himself up off the ground. “But don’t worry. I’ll be gentle. Just like you asked.”

As he left me there, he said something else. So quietly, I almost didn’t hear it at all: “If I can.”

DON

I'd promised Bea I wouldn't kill her waste-of-space fiancé.

But Simon Roth wasn't Bea's fiancé anymore. Now that I was Bea's husband, I considered their engagement thoroughly over.

And while I'd promised that I wouldn't kill him, I hadn't sworn any oaths against hurting the stupid prick.

No less than he deserved.

I flew across the Abyss with fire in my eyes and the taste of Bea's perfect cunt still on my tongue.

She was falling for me all over again. I could see it in her eyes and feel it in my bones. In a way, it was inevitable. Of course she was falling for me. She was the other half of my soul.

For her, I'd spare Simon's life.

I hoped he'd appreciate her generosity.

I suspected that he wouldn't.

"Enjoying your honeymoon, lover-boy?" Mal met me at the mouth of the Pit. Some parts of the Abyss were darker and deeper than others. To find a place more inescapable than the black vastness of the Pit, Mal and Lock would have had to push Simon straight into a black hole.

"I am," I assured Mal. "But if there's anything worth interrupting it, it's certainly this."

"True. But still, let's make it quick." Mal wore a pair of jeans and a black Johnny Cash t-shirt with cowboy boots. His shoulders were stiff with

pent-up energy. The toothpick between his teeth looked like it had nearly been chewed all the way through. “I haven’t minded hanging around here to make sure the fucker doesn’t wiggle his way back out somehow, but I’m eager to get back to Earth soon as possible, if ya don’t mind.”

“You’re worried for Ava,” I guessed. Given the attack on Bea, he had every right to be. We still had no idea what kind of forces might have been targeting the women we loved. “Have you found her again?”

“Never lost her in the first place. She’s back in Greenriver with her family, runnin’ that little garden shop of theirs.”

“She’s safe, I hope.”

“Safe enough,” Mal said with a nod. “That mother of hers has some kind of magic to her. Dunno what kind. Plenty of protection around the place, but still—I’ll feel a hell of a lot better when I can get back to keeping an eye on her again. Just in case.”

“Thank you for being here,” I said, and meant it. “I know how much she means to you.”

“I’m better off than Moloch is, at least.” Mal tucked his thumbs in his pockets and spat his toothpick into the Pit. “He’s having a hell of a time trackin’ down poor Joan. After the wedding, he reckons she all but disappeared off the face of the Earth.”

“That’s sure to have pissed him off.” Lock was as good of a hunter as he was a warrior. I didn’t imagine it was doing his ego any favors, not being able to track down his lady love. “But if any one of the girls are capable of protecting themselves from danger, it’s Joan. He knows that.”

Bea had an excellent backhand when she was in a face-slapping mood, and if Mal was right about Ava’s mother, Ava probably had a little magic of her own to protect herself with. But Joan—I’d seen her fight before. In battle, she was just as ruthless and capable as Lock was.

“Oh, he knows it,” Mal assured me. “But he knows how much she likes to go lookin’ for danger, too.” Mal nodded to the pit. “You gonna kill him when we’re done?”

“No,” I said with a glower. “I promised Bea I wouldn’t.”

“That was generous of you.” Mal laughed humorlessly. “You ready to get this over with, then?”

I cracked my knuckles and nodded. “Let’s bring him up.”

I crouched down and reached into the Pit. It was a bottomless chasm that defied any of the physics that bound the Earth. But here in my realm, I

could find things within it as easily as I could search my own pockets for spare change.

I reached in deep and caught hold of the collar of Simon's tux almost immediately. My grasp yanked him out of the infinite free fall that he'd been languishing in ever since Mal and Lock had pushed him in last night.

With a grunt, I hauled him out of the Pit and tossed him to the ground at Mal's feet.

"What..." Simon pushed himself into a sitting position, blinking and looking dazed. His nose was still broken from where my fist had connected to his face. The blood had dried over his lips and chin. The bags under his eyes were swollen and bruised purple and green.

He looked like shit.

He *was* shit.

When he finally became aware enough of his surroundings to notice Mal and me looming over him, a yelp left his throat.

"Fuck," he swore. Fear filled his eyes as he tried to scramble away.

I stopped him with a swift kick to his ribs. It felt good to hurt him. Would have felt even better to kill him.

But I'd promised Bea I wouldn't.

It was a promise I'd have to do my best to keep.

"Not so fast, kiddo." Mal grabbed Simon by the scruff of his neck and pulled him back up off the ground. "Got a coupla questions for you. Reckon you'd better answer 'em before you get more than just a kick in the ribs."

"Fuck you," Simon spat at us as he coughed.

Mal and I shared a look.

Then, I kicked him again, a little harder this time.

"We can do this all day," I informed Simon. "If you want to minimize the pain I'm willing to put you through, I'd suggest you stop swearing and start talking."

Simon coughed some more. This time, he stayed on the ground.

"What do you want to know?" he rasped. "I haven't done anything wrong."

"You and I are of very different opinions on that front." I dropped down to sit back on my heels. "You took a hit out on my wife. I'd like to know exactly what kind of brain worms you'd have to be teeming with to come to the conclusion that it was a clever idea."

“Your wife?” Simon glanced up at me, his blue eyes sharp with rage. “I think you mean *my* wife.”

I smiled at him for a moment. “No, I don’t.”

“She married *you*?” Simon’s face twisted in confusion. “I find that hard to believe. My father never would have allowed it. When he finds out—”

“Your father already knows,” I assured him. “Gave me his blessing and everything. Looks like you’re not exactly Daddy’s little golden boy after all.”

I still didn’t trust Leviathan. But figuring out what role he played in all of this would be much more difficult than getting information out of his son.

Simon was an idiot. Little more than a child in a grown man’s body.

The apple couldn’t have fallen farther from the tree if someone had picked it up and thrown it across the orchard.

“Fucking asshole,” Simon snarled. “As if I wanted to marry Bea in the first place. She’s a—”

I took a fistful of Simon’s hair in my hand and pulled his head back sharply, forcing him to meet my eyes.

“I would choose your next words very carefully,” I warned him. “You don’t want to find out what a demon like me does to men like you when they speak unkindly about my bride.”

Simon gulped, then nodded. As suspected, he was quick to lose his nerve.

“Like I said. I didn’t want to marry her. She didn’t want to marry me.” He licked his lips, which were chapped and dry. “I wanted her to love me, once upon a time. I knew she never would.”

“So, you reckoned the best plan of action was to kill her for it?” Mal’s lips pulled back in a sneer. He looked at me and shrugged. “Go on. Kick him again.”

“No!” Simon yelped, jerking away from me. He fell backwards as I let his hair slip from my fist. “Please. No more kicking.”

“You’d better start explaining yourself, then,” I said. “And fast.”

“All right, all right!” Simon held his hands up in surrender. “Yes, okay? I understand that trying to kill Bea was a bit of an overreaction.”

“Understatement of the fuckin’ year,” Mal scoffed.

“But I did my best to make allowances for her while we were engaged. I tried to make her love me, but she was never interested in that. I let her date whoever she wanted. I gave her her freedom. But there was no way either of us were getting out of that marriage. Just...put yourself in my shoes for a second, okay?”

I glanced down at Simon’s dress shoes. They were scuffed and spotted with his blood.

“I’d rather not.”

“Try,” he pleaded. “How would you feel, being forced to marry a woman who would never want you? Never obey you? Never be the wife you deserved?”

“That’s rich,” I said with a cold laugh. “If you ask me, you never deserved *her*. Not the other way around.”

“I wasn’t interested in being married to a woman who didn’t give a fuck about me as a man.” Simon shrugged. “So yes. I made a deal with a demon to put her out of her misery. It was a mercy, really. If she would rather die than love me, who was I to deny her?”

“Which demon?” My hands curled into fists. “Tell me now and I might let you live.”

“Wouldn’t you like to know?” Simon’s eyes were full of fear as his gaze focused on my hands, but his voice was petulant. Mocking. He just couldn’t seem to help himself. “It doesn’t matter that you married her. It doesn’t matter what you try to do to keep her safe. My father may have given you his blessing, but my father doesn’t have the powers of Hell at his disposal.”

“No,” I agreed. “But I do. I’m a king of Hell, you spoiled rotten little shit.”

“So am I.” Mal’s smile was cocky and threatening. “So imagine what the two of us might do to a yellow-bellied, half-human idiot like you if you don’t answer our questions.”

“Kings of Hell?” Simon scoffed bitterly. “I know who you are. Abaddon and Malacoda. You’re just two low-level demons who crawled out of Belial’s rotten womb and managed to weasel your way onto a couple of thrones. You might have the title, but you’re not even members of the Fallen. You don’t have the powers that my connections have.”

Mal and I exchanged another glance. We both laughed.

If he thought he could get to us by insulting our mother, he was sorely mistaken.

If anything, I was fairly certain Belial would have taken that *rotten womb* comment as a compliment. The highest form of flattery, really.

In his anger, Simon didn't even realize that he'd outed himself.

"So you've made a deal with a member of the Fallen," I guessed. "Which one?"

"Mulciber's too soft for assassination attempts," Mal mused. "And Mom's not interested in murdering humans."

"So either Beelzebub or Mammon." I looked back to Simon. "Are you going to tell us which of them it is, or would you prefer that we beat it out of you?"

"You can beat me all you like," Simon sneered. "It won't help you. Even if you knew who I'd made my deal with, you wouldn't be able to stop him. Any move you make, he already predicted before you even thought of it."

"I highly doubt that," I said. Zeb dealt in information. Mammon in money. Neither of them could see the future, though. "You're bluffing."

"You'd like to think that, wouldn't you?" Simon chuckled like he'd just said something hilarious. I wasn't inclined to agree. "He knows all about you—and through him, so do I. You and Bea really thought you were being clever about keeping your relationship a secret, didn't you? But I knew. I knew the whole time."

I didn't show it, but that rattled me more than I would have liked. Simon had no way of knowing that Bea and I had been together before the wedding. Bea certainly wouldn't have spilled it to him—as I understood it, their betrothal had been built on a strict rule of *don't ask, don't tell*.

But whether Simon realized it or not, my goading was causing him to say more than he should have.

If I kept it up, I suspected we might actually get somewhere.

"You're a bad liar, Simon Roth," I said, shaking my head and scoffing. "Your father would be ashamed of you, if he could see you right now."

"I'm a liar, am I?" Simon's cheeks turned red with anger. Good. I was getting to him. "If I'm such a liar, then tell me how else I would know this: all three of you idiot kings of Hell have set your hearts on women you'll never be able to keep. And when they're all dead, you'll only have yourselves to blame."

Mal's jaw tensed. That confirmed our suspicions—Ava and Joan were in danger as well. “How come your new buddy has so much interest in these human women at all, huh? If he's so great and powerful, aren't the affairs of humans a little below his pay grade?”

“Because they're dangerous,” said Simon. “Especially in the hands of stupid assholes like *you*. Arranging for them to be married off to other men like they have been in the past hasn't worked this time around—obviously.” Simon turned his head, coughed, and spat blood on the ground. “And manipulating the angels to take their memories wasn't enough to put a stop to things this time, either.”

I arched a brow. “Enough to stop what, exactly?”

“The end of the world.” Simon looked between Mal and me with surprise. “The two of you really *are* idiots, aren't you? I'm surprised you haven't figured it out yet.”

“Why don't you be a little sweetheart and enlighten us, then?” Mal suggested.

My chest was pounding with trepidation and concern. I was lucky I didn't show it on my face as well.

But maybe I was even luckier that Simon seemed almost desperate to talk to someone—anyone. Even if he was laying out everything we needed to know on a silver platter without so much as a thought about how he was simultaneously digging his own grave.

The little shit must not have had many friends to chat with, I supposed. I couldn't imagine why.

“It was bad enough that Lucifer was allowed to have his child with Lilith. But if the three of you can't manage to keep away from Beatrice and Ava and Joan—and my friend in the Fallen already knows you aren't capable of that—then things will only get worse from here on out.” Cruelly, he laughed. “Tell me—are you all really so in love that you'll risk the fate of Heaven, Hell and Earth over it? If you ask me, those bitches are hardly worth it.”

I held myself together for just long enough to hear Mal draw in a breath.

I knew he'd want to beat Simon bloody for even insinuating that Ava was a bitch.

Thankfully, I managed to beat Mal to the punch.

I wanted to hurt Simon more.

I threw myself out him, fists raining down on any part of him I could hit. He held his hands up, trying his best to protect his face, but it wasn't enough.

My knuckles hammered against his throat and cracked against his ribs. When he lowered his arms to clutch at his chest in pain, I smashed his broken nose in all over again. Bloodied his mouth. Blackened his eyes.

I'd held my temper back for as long as I could. I'd humored Simon's sneering and his evasions of my questions. I'd suffered his insults. For Bea's sake, I'd kept myself calm.

But if he thought he could get away with insulting Bea like that in front of me, he was sorely mistaken.

I suppose my hands slipped.

Whoops.

"C'mon," Mal grunted, taking me by the shoulders and pulling me off Simon. "Keep that up and you're gonna kill him."

"I want to kill him," I snarled, jerking forward again.

"I know you do," Mal agreed, holding tight. "But you made a promise. Best keep it. Look at him, Don."

My chest heaved with heavy breaths as I straightened and stood back. On the ground, Simon was cowering and weeping. His face was a bloody pulp.

"You've hurt him enough." Mal clapped me on the back. "Don't get me wrong, I think you should kill him too. But right now, you've gotta let it go."

"Fine." I turned away before I changed my mind. "Kick him back into the Pit, then. I don't think we're going to get anything more out of him right now anyway."

I heard Simon wheeze and yelp as Mal nudged his body back over the Pit's edge.

He wouldn't like being back in the Pit either, I was sure. But he was safer that way.

My temper was still burning hot in my veins. If I'd had to so much as look at him for another second, I knew I would have snapped his neck.

"You should go," I said to Mal. I wiped my knuckles against my slacks and let out a low growl of frustration. "You heard him. As we suspected, Ava's in danger too."

“If you’re sure.” Mal came to stand next to me and nodded to the Pit. “You don’t reckon he can get out of there, can he?”

“No,” I said with certainty. “He’ll be falling through the darkness until I’ve decided what to do with him next.”

Maybe I’d just leave him there forever.

If Bea wouldn’t let me kill him, it would serve him right.

I certainly couldn’t let him go. Not now.

I opened a portal back to Earth for Mal and closed it back up once he was through. I knew he’d contact Lock once he knew Ava was safe to warn him of what we’d just learned.

Either Mammon or Beelzebub had plans for Bea, Joan and Ava. Sinister ones.

They didn’t want us anywhere near the human women who had our hearts. It was all the more reason to keep them close at our sides.

It made me furious, all these machinations of angels and demons alike. No—more than furious.

Simon had implied that Bea, Ava, and Joan had all been taken from us before this. Married off to other men or simply killed.

I knew that Lucifer’s bride Evie—Lilith, in a past life—had been reincarnated hundreds of times before.

Now, I had reason to believe that Bea, Ava, and Joan were part of that cycle as well.

Everything and everyone that tried to keep me from Bea was the enemy. She was mine. *Mine*.

I wanted blood.

Starting with Simon’s. I’d work my way down the list from there.

But Mal was right. My promise to Bea was one I needed to keep.

Simon Roth wouldn’t die today. No matter how deeply he might have deserved to.

After what I’d just learned, I needed something else to focus on to keep my mind off of turning back and ending him once and for all.

I needed a distraction. I needed release.

I needed my wife.

BEA

In Don's absence, admittedly I was a little lost.

He'd left my knees trembling. My legs were wobbly as I picked myself up off the grass and took my little bubble of color back into the mansion.

Every room I entered turned Technicolor the moment I stepped into it. The Abyss was a coloring book, and I was a one-woman pack of crayons. As I walked through the halls, I turned them from gray to pretty golds and reds and browns.

It's never lonely here when you're around, Don had told me.

How many times had I colored this place in? I didn't recognize any of the rooms I moved through, but they did seem vaguely familiar somehow. Without my memories, it was hard to tell.

Still, having the power to make color in the Abyss was kind of fun. As I stepped into the library, I smiled as all the books on the shelves shifted into a rainbow of blues and reds and greens.

I liked to read. Always had—even when my parents told me it was a waste of time. I knew they would have preferred that I'd focused my time on learning languages and doing my math homework and memorizing etiquette rules instead of burying my nose in books. I'd humored them as much as I could.

But many of the best parts of my childhood had been spent sitting out in the garden with *Jane Eyre* or *Little Women* open in my lap. Don's library

here was even larger than the one I'd grown up with—and the books on its shelves were far more interesting than my parents' collection as well.

The library at Nevermore didn't just have law books and the classics. Don had romances and horror novels, Haruki Murakami and Stephen King. That surprised me—I didn't think of Don as a causal reader. But parts of his library made me feel like I'd just wandered into a bookstore full of bestsellers.

Other parts, I was almost too afraid to touch. Some of the shelves were full of books so old and fragile looking, I would have expected to find them in a museum, not a personal collection.

I wiped my hands clean on my dress and carefully pulled out a copy of Dante's *Divine Comedy*. It was written in its original language, Italian. The pages were tawny in color and incredibly thin.

There was something strangely comforting about this book. Its weight in my hands just felt...*right* somehow. Familiar. Like something that was important.

Maybe at some point in my lost memories, it had been.

Unless I was willing to pay Don's price of kisses for more recollections, I supposed there was no way I'd ever know.

Then again, given the way Don's kisses felt on my lips... Maybe I could afford the cost of remembering.

Maybe when he got back from interrogating Simon, that's what we'd do: spend the whole day here in the library, making out and remembering.

Assuming that he'd kept his word and avoided murdering my fiancé. *Ex-fiancé*.

Now that I was married to Don, it was hard to say exactly what Simon was to me now. But I hoped he appreciated the way I'd bargained for his life.

I had no doubt that Don would have killed him otherwise. Maybe not right away, but eventually.

Then again, Simon had never really been the gracious type.

If he'd really made a deal with a demon to secure my demise, he was lucky that I even gave a damn whether he was alive or not.

"Find something interesting?" Don's voice was deep and gravelly as he called out to me from the doorway.

I snapped the book shut and turned, startled.

I hadn't heard him come in.

“I was just... Oh.” I blinked as I looked Don up and down. His hair was tousled. His eyes were dark. His gaze was intense.

His shirt was stained with blood.

I slipped the book back onto its shelf and frowned. Seeing him like that again, bloodied just like he’d been in that memory, made my heart pang like I’d just been shot through the chest.

“What happened?” I moved to him quickly, breaking into something just short of a run. My hands shifted over his body, hovering half an inch over his skin. I wanted to touch him. Badly. But I didn’t know if he was safe to touch. “Are you hurt? Did *Simon* do this to you?”

Somehow, I doubted that. Simon seemed like the kind of man that Don could break in half in an instant if he’d been of the mind to.

But I guessed I’d doubted that Simon would try to have me killed on our wedding night, too.

“I’m not hurt. Simon is.” Don dropped his gaze to the blood on his shirt for a moment, then grabbed my wrist and pressed my hand to his chest. I could feel his heart beating through his skin. It was pounding and racing, hard and furious. “This is his blood. Not mine.”

“Oh.” I guessed I should have been more concerned about Simon’s well-being instead, then. But I only felt a tender kind of relief. “I’m glad you’re all right. But...”

I glanced down at his hand on my wrist. The skin over his knuckles was broken and even bloodier than the rest of him.

Some of that blood was dark and glimmering. Not Simon’s at all, but Don’s.

“You are hurt,” I breathed. “Your hands—”

“They’ll heal.” Don took my throat in his other hand, framing my jaw with his fingers and thumb. “I did as you asked. He’s not dead.”

“I don’t care about Simon right now, Don.” I looked up at him with pleading eyes. “We need to clean your wounds. Please. Let me help.”

“Later.” Don walked me backwards, moving my body with his. His eyes burned with steely flames. He didn’t take them off me. It was like he didn’t know how. “If you want to wash that bastard’s blood off me, it’ll have to wait.”

“Why?” I didn’t understand. Something had happened, obviously. Simon himself was annoying, but I doubted that would be enough to make Don act like *this*. It must have been something Simon told Don. Something

he'd said to make Don this satanic. Demonic. Unhinged. "Tell me what happened. What did he do?"

"Later," Don growled again. He pressed my back up against one of the bookshelves and pinned my hips there with his own. I could feel his cock against my stomach, thick and stiff beneath his pants. "Right now, I need something from you."

"Anything," I whispered. My chest ached for him. For his broken knuckles and that furious look in his eyes. My body ached too—but not quite in the same way. "What do you need? Tell me and I'll do it."

"I'm going to kiss you again, Bea." His lips moved in close to mine as he gave me the warning. "I told you, didn't I? That I'd loved someone before you."

"You did." I'd actually managed to feel jealous of her when he'd said it. Silly of me, maybe, but I felt it again now. "Did Simon tell you something about her?"

"In a way." Don's eyes seemed to be searching for something within mine. Beneath my hand, his chest rose and fell with a ragged breath. He dragged his thumb to my lower lip and shook his head. "I think you were her. I think she was you. *Beatrice*."

He said my name like it was a bitter, forbidden fruit.

"How?" It sounded ridiculous. Impossible. "I know I've forgotten things, but I've only ever been me."

"I know. You're always you." Don's lips eased even closer to mine. His breath was hot and humid against my mouth. He smelled like mint and blood. "That's why I need to be sure."

"Sure of what?" I asked, but Don was done answering my questions. I could tell.

"Tell me I can kiss you, Bea. I need you. I need your mouth." His voice was even lower now. Even more commanding. "Now."

"You can kiss me," I breathed. "Of course you can."

His lips crushed against mine, burning hot and rough enough to bruise.

This time, when I felt myself going somewhere else, I felt Don coming with me.

This time, I wasn't going alone.

BEA

Somewhere in a memory...

Florence, Italy 1287

It was my wedding day again.

Funny, almost, how all wedding days felt the same. There were always flowers. There was always a dress and a veil and shoes that hurt my feet.

There was always a sense of dread.

And somehow, one way or another, I always ended up in Don's arms.

"Is this really what you want, then?" Don's voice was dark and deep as he pulled away from our kiss. "To marry him instead of me?"

"You know that's not true." How could he possibly believe that? "No, Don. I don't want to marry Simon dei Bardi. I never did."

"Then why do it?" His eyes searched mine, challenging me. "Why do anything you don't want?"

"It's not that simple." I shook my head. My chest was crushing inward on my aching heart. "You know that too."

"Oh, I know. I know everything, *mi cara*." Don scoffed. "Everything except why you'd sell your soul away to some pathetic associate of your

father's instead of running away with me like you want."

"I wish I could," I told him. "But my soul isn't mine to sell."

My father had already auctioned it off to the highest bidder. I had no say in the matter.

If Don really knew everything, then he'd know that as well.

"Is it because of what I am? Is that why you refuse me?"

"Of course it isn't." That wasn't entirely true, though.

Don was *infernale*. *Il diavolo*. Satanic. Sinful. A demon and a devil and a thing that belonged to Hell.

My soul had already been promised to another, along with the rest of me.

In loving Don, I was certain I was already damned in spite of it.

I didn't know that he had a soul at all.

"I'm sorry, Don." It killed to do it, but I slipped from his arms and backed away. "You know that if I had a choice..."

"What am I meant to do without you, *stellina*?" For a moment, Don's face looked as broken as my soul felt. "Today, I lose you. How am I supposed to go on?"

"You'll have to write more poems about me, I suppose." The ones he'd already written for me were beautiful. Glorious. The stuff of legends. Maybe he could take his pain and write more. "Tragic ones."

"I'm tired of pawning off my words on that poet whose name I've been borrowing," he said with a glower. "They don't belong to anyone but you."

"And I belong to you," I said softly. "You know I do. I always will."

"Your heart might belong to me." Don's hands curled into fists as he turned away. "But the rest of you—that will all belong to him now. Not mine at all anymore."

"My heart's the biggest piece of me." Slowly, I stepped toward him again. I knew I shouldn't have. I knew it was wrong. But I'd fallen in love with a demon. For every moment after that, right and wrong had been incredibly blurred. I laid a palm against his back, over his linen shirt. Over the same place where sometimes, he spread his wings. "The most important part of me will always be yours."

"I don't want part of you, Beatrice. I want all of you."

"I know." I smoothed my hand down his back as tears began to form in my eyes. "But my heart is the only part of me that's mine to give."

For a long moment, neither of us spoke. Through the window, church bells began to ring through the streets of Florence.

We didn't have long. But even in moments of silence, I knew that every second we had together counted now.

"No," Don finally said. He turned to me and took me in his arms once more. "Not the only part."

He smoothed his hand down my hip, tracing the outline of my thigh through the skirts of my wedding gown. His fingers dipped lower, pushing the skirts aside so he could reach beneath them. His touch roamed up the soft fabric of my stockings, climbing greedily until finally, he found bare skin.

"Is that what you want from me? My body on my wedding day?"

"I told you. I want all of you." He lifted my leg up until my thigh was hugging his hip. "And if I can't have that... Then yes, your body will have to be enough."

He moved my skirts up higher, pinning them between us. His cock was hard as he pressed it against me through his trousers.

His eyes were locked on mine.

"Ask me to take you, Beatrice." His voice was ragged and commanding. His gaze was intense.

I licked my lips, desperate to agree immediately. I knew this was wrong. I belonged to another man—or I was supposed to.

But *supposed to* wasn't what we were dealing with. Not right now.

I was well aware of my reality: no matter who else tried to lay claim to me, I would always belong to him.

My hesitation cost me dearly, though.

"*Beg* me to take you," he growled into my ear. "Beg me to fuck you here, in your wedding dress, on your wedding day. Beg me to claim you before that man we both know you have no desire for can so much as touch you. Give yourself to me. You don't belong to him. You shouldn't be his wife. It's a sin for him to try to claim you against your will, and when he dies, he'll burn for it. But first...yes, beg me. Beg me to make you mine before he can make you his."

"Please." This time, I answered right away. I couldn't hold myself back any longer. Not from him. "Fuck me. Take me. *Please*. I'm yours."

He unfastened his belt with quick-moving fingers. When his cock stroked against my slit, he found me dripping for him already. Eager.

Willing—far too willing. I'd been ready for him long before he ever touched me.

As he entered me, slow and firm, an ache pulsed through my cunt. There was pain, and yet, there wasn't. It was quickly eclipsed by the sheer ecstasy of having him inside me. I'd been a virgin up until that moment.

Now, I knew why marriage was spoken of as two souls joining. He filled me with far more than just his cock. Pleasure, yes, and sorrow, and joy.

I'd been made for him. Anything else was a lie. He was right. To belong to any other man was sin, and I would relish the thought of my husband-to-be burning in hellfire for it.

The fire that Don stirred in my body burned too, but only in the most delicious way imaginable. He thrust up into me, stroking against my core, and I wrapped my leg around his waist to take him deeper still.

"I love you," I gasped against his lips as his kisses conquered my mouth with every buck of his hips. "I love you. I love you. You and only you."

"I love you too, Beatrice," he growled back at me through the kisses. "God in Heaven—Satan below. I love you too. You and only you."

The flames inside me rose high, burning bright. I arched against him, crying out and straining my muscles. He was moving me toward something. Salvation or damnation—I didn't care anymore.

Not for as long as his thick cock was deep within my channel and his fingers were in my hair and his lips were against mine.

When the fire erupted inside my core, I finally couldn't hold it back any longer. I let it burn. I burned with it. The world became an explosion, and all I could do was cling to him and gasp and pray that the strength of his body would stop mine from falling apart.

His seed rushed up into me in return, gushing from his tip and fountaining deep. With hard, forceful thrusts, he sent it shooting deeper still. My cunt convulsed around his thick shaft, milking out every last drop with unabashed greed. The veins of his cock throbbed back in response, sending me further into the flames of my need.

This was wrong, and yet it wasn't.

Sin was tricky. It was supposed to feel good. That was why people were tempted into sinning in the first place.

But nothing was better than the way I felt as he held me in his arms and took me as his own.

A pleasure like that could only possibly be divine.

“My Don.” I rested my forehead against his, blinking back tears I hadn’t realized I was crying. My voice was soft and holy. When I smoothed my fingertips down his cheek, I found a stray tear on his face as well. “My Dante.”

“I’m going to find you again, Beatrice,” he panted against my lips. He looked so certain of it, I wanted desperately to believe him. “I’m going to make you mine. If not in this life, then in the next.”

“After death?” How would I ever be able to wait that long? “But...You can’t come to Heaven, *tesoro*. They won’t let you in.”

“There are other ways to live again,” he promised me. “And when you come back to me—next time, you’ll be mine. Mine and mine alone.”

“Promise?” My heart was broken. Every part of me was. If he was lying now, it would kill even this last fragile scrap of hope. “Do you swear it?”

“Yes,” he whispered. “I swear.”

But when he kissed me again, it was the kind of kiss that told me even he wasn’t sure.

He kissed me like it would be the last time.

DON

“Don... What was that?” Bea whispered as she eased out of our kiss. “Fate,” I whispered back to her. I held her face in my hands. In spite of the tear in my eye, a smile was beginning to tug at my lips. “That was fate.”

“I was me, but...” Bea frowned. “I wasn’t. I was someone else, too. Wasn’t I?”

“You were her, Bea. The woman I told you about. Beatrice Portinari—the only person I ever loved before you came into my life.” I wiped the tears away from her cheeks. “Only, she wasn’t another woman at all. You were her, and she’s you.”

“How, though?” Gently, Bea shook her head. “Reincarnation...that’s not exactly a biblical belief.”

“Isn’t it?” We weren’t the Hindus or the Buddhists, no, but that didn’t mean living again wasn’t possible. Quite the opposite, in fact. “Resurrection comes in many forms.”

“Beatrice Portinari...” Bea glanced over at the bookshelf I’d found her standing at when I came in. “I know that name. I called you...Dante. Does that mean...”

“I had a poetic phase, once upon a time.” Maybe that was embarrassing to admit, but I felt no shame about it. If anything, it amused me. I knew Bea was familiar with my work. “Everything I wrote, I wrote for you.”

“You were Dante Alighieri.” Bea’s laugh was full of disbelief. “*Inferno, Purgatorio, Paradiso...* The entire *Divine Comedy*. That was all...you?”

“I *called* myself Dante,” I corrected her. “I let him borrow some of my work and ideas in exchange for borrowing his name.”

“*Incipit vita nova.*” Bea breathed the words from one of my poems like they were holy. “A new life begins. If I really was *her*... Is that what we’ve been doing all this time? Reincarnating? Finding each other again?”

“I wish,” I admitted. If only we could have been like Lucifer and his Lilith, who’d loved each other a thousand times throughout the ages. “You’re a rare thing, Bea. As far as I know, this is only your second time on Earth.”

“But...” She bit her lip. A look of tragedy passed through her lovely brown eyes. “I know what happened to Beatrice Portinari. She was dead by age twenty-five.”

“Yes. She was.” I’d lost her to another man, then I’d lost her completely. “You were. You wouldn’t run away with me like I wanted, and so I had to do my best to watch over you from afar. In the end...” I sighed. “I lost you, then you died. You wouldn’t come with me willingly, and I couldn’t bring myself to steal you away against your will. It was the greatest regret of my entire life.”

“But you said we’re fated.”

“We are.”

“Is that our fate, then? To find each other, fall in love...lose each other?” Her fingers curled against my bloody shirt. “Is that my destiny? To die?”

“Not if I can help it.” So far, this time I’d managed to avoid making the mistakes of my past. I intended to keep things that way. “We may be star-crossed, darling, but if fate gave you to me... To keep you, I’d put out every fucking star in the sky.”

“I don’t want you to put out the stars for me, Don,” Bea whispered. All of this seemed to be hitting her hard. I didn’t blame her. In my chest, my own heart was still pounding with passion. With rage. With fear—and yes, with love. In such a mix of emotions, I could understand if she was feeling a little overwhelmed right now. “Destiny can’t be changed, can it? It’s no use. No matter how powerful you are...you can’t turn the tides of fate.”

“I’m not so sure about that,” I said, taking her shoulders into my hands. “This time, you didn’t marry some other man. This time, you

married *me*. A difference. A significant one.”

Bea held her breath for a long moment. Then, slowly, she let it out once more.

“If all of this is true—”

“It is.” Why the fuck would I lie?

Bea bit her lip. “Do you think it will be enough?”

“It will be,” I said with certainty. “It has to be. But...”

“What?” Her eyes were full of confusion as they searched mine. “What’s wrong?”

I dropped my gaze to her breasts, so full and pert and firm. Luscious. Beautiful. They rose and fell tantalizingly with every breath she took.

When my eyes flicked back up toward her, they were as dark as they’d ever been.

“It would be easier to keep you safe this time if you’d give yourself to me first.”

The intensity of my stare didn’t waver. But as I watched her breath catch in her throat, my cock stiffened on instinct. My balls were tense, tight and full of cum. Already, precum was beginning to form in a pearl at my tip.

God, how I would have liked to take her then and there. The way she breathed as she thought about what to say in return told me she might have even let me.

But no. That wasn’t what I wanted.

She’d find that out soon enough.

“You mean...that we should consummate our marriage,” Bea said slowly. Her cheeks were tinged pink—not in a blush of embarrassment this time, though. They were flushed like she’d spent far too much time today imagining doing exactly that: giving herself to me as soon as I got back.

“I mean I want your body, Bea.” I wanted to claim it now. I wanted to cup my hand against her cunt, drop to my knees and lap at her sweet nectar from the chalice of her sex all over again. I wanted to force her to her knees and show her exactly how good my cock would feel in her mouth. But I wouldn’t. It was what she expected—to be taken. It would be far too easy. “I mean I want to fuck you. To make love to you as my bride.”

“And if I do...it will help you protect me?”

I smirked. “Yes. And it will help you protect yourself as well. I’ve shown you how gifted I am in bed already—but my cock is far from the

only gift I can give you today.”

“Is that the only reason you want me? So I can be safe?”

“You’re far from stupid, Bea.” I shook my head, almost disappointed in her for a moment. I was fairly certain I’d made myself clear exactly the intention behind my desires. “You know that’s not true.”

“I know,” she whispered. Her lips trembled as she spoke. “But...can I think about it? Just for a little while longer?”

“Of course.” I took a step back from her, then another, then another. “Take all the time you need. When you’re ready to give me your answer, I’ll find you.”

“How will you know where I am?” she asked.

I laughed. “I know where everything is here in my realm, kitten. But if you’re worried I won’t be able to find you... When you’re ready, just say my name and I’ll be there.”

BEA

I stayed in the library for a long time after Don left.
Reincarnation. Love, sex and marriage in another time. Another life.

It was hard to believe. Even harder to accept. But in spite of that...it *felt* true. All of it did.

Trusting my logic and intuition had gotten me far in life. My work with Leviathan Financial depended on it. Within moments of meeting a client, I had to figure out exactly how to present myself to them. Exactly what they wanted. Some people were easy to read, and others were much, much harder.

When it came to that, I simply had to trust my gut.

And my gut said that I could trust Don. That Don was telling me the truth.

It wasn't just my instincts that were talking to me as I mulled over everything he said, though.

My body was making some compelling arguments as well.

My cunt was wet for him. After he'd gone down on me near the pond earlier, I didn't know that it would ever be anything but soaked for him ever again.

My breasts ached for him. They wanted to be squeezed and caressed and bitten and sucked.

And my mouth...

Fuck. The things my mouth wanted to do to him.

In truth, I'd known my answer to Don's offer the moment he stepped out of the library's doors.

I'd only needed to talk myself into it first.

"*Abaddon,*" I whispered as I wandered through the library's shelves. Behind every turn, I expected to find him waiting for me. I anticipated watching him materialize from thin air. "I'm ready. Come back to me, Don."

I raised my hand up to trace the spines of the books as I moved down a new aisle.

I'd called for him. Just like he'd asked. Now...where was he?

Thankfully, he didn't leave me wondering for long.

A hand reached out from behind me and caught my wrist. Don twirled me around quickly. When I stumbled, tangled up in my own feet, he caught me against his chest.

"Have you made your decision?"

I had. But his gaze was so intense and his heartbeat beneath my fingertips was so strong and his scent was so delicious, for a moment, I could only stare.

I was awestruck that after so long of not believing in anything, this was the man I was about to put all my faith in.

He had me at a loss for words.

"Your eyes are already saying yes, Bea," he purred down at me. "But I need your lips to tell me the same."

My chest was tense. My cunt was flushed hot and dripping with honey. My breaths were short and sharp and full of longing.

I couldn't hold myself back any longer.

Not from him.

I wrapped my arms around his neck and pulled his mouth down to mine so I could crush my lips against his.

He welcomed my kiss. His tongue danced against mine, flicking and twisting teasingly. I was desperate for him. Surely, he felt it. But every time I tried to settle into that perfect rhythm I knew we always found within each other's kisses, he denied me.

"You know how I love kissing you, kitten," Don purred as he pulled away. "But I wasn't asking for that."

“Then what?” What better answer could I have given him? “What do you want?”

“I want to hear you say it. Out loud. One simple word and I’m yours.”

I licked my lips. They still tasted like his kiss. Then, eagerly, I nodded.

“Please,” I whispered.

He chuckled and ran his fingers through my hair.

“I was looking for a yes, Bea. But if you’re dead set on begging me...”

He kissed me again, rougher this time. I gasped and moaned as my lips moved with greed against his. When he drew away again, his eyes were dark once more. “Best do it on your knees.”

He took my shoulders in his hands and pushed down. I dropped to the floor without hesitation and stared up at him with wide eyes. My heart pounded as I watched him, waiting to see what he’d do next.

“I’ve gone far too long without enjoying that pretty mouth of yours.”

He unfastened his belt and unzipped his slacks, then reached into them and pulled out his cock. “We’re going to rectify that now—then, when you’ve pleased me, I’m going to take your cunt. Do you understand?”

Quickly, I nodded. My mouth was already filling with saliva. My pussy clenched with need.

I wanted him. I was starving for him.

Whatever he asked of me, I was prepared to give.

“Use your words, kitten.”

He stroked his cock in his fist, pumping it twice. It was long and thick with a swollen, dark pink tip. Already, it glistened with precum, sticky and clear, barely an inch away from my lips.

“Yes,” I breathed. “I understand.”

He pulled my head toward him. I opened my mouth to take him inside. My lips wrapped around his tip immediately. I hollowed my cheeks as I sucked him. His glans slid toward the back of my tongue, giving me my first taste of his precum. Delicious, salty, and just the slightest bit sweet.

Above me, Don hissed. His balls tightened as I took them into my hand.

“Fuck,” he swore. “I almost forgot how hot your mouth is.”

I bobbed my head up and down, taking him deeper. His fingers twisted into my hair, setting the pace. If he’d almost forgotten, I was more than happy to remind him. To make sure that he never even came close to forgetting anything about me ever again.

When he reached the back of my throat, his tip slipped down it for just a moment. My throat and my pussy clenched in unison at the sensation. It only pulled him down into my throat even deeper still.

“God,” Don panted. “You suck cock like a fucking dream, Bea.”

He pulled my mouth off of his shaft with a sudden, sharp tug of my hair. I barely had time to catch my breath before he’d taken me into his arms again.

“You nearly made me come just then,” he warned as he shoved my body up against one of the bookshelves. His fingers curled possessively around the neckline of my sundress. He ripped it down the middle like it was made of tissue paper instead of fabric, tearing the dress all the way down to my lowest ribs. Don caught my breasts in his hands as they spilled out of my ruined top. He squeezed them tight, sliding his fingers down to tease my nipples. I caught a flash of dark flames flicker through his eyes in the moment before he stole another kiss. “But I’ve waited for far too long to spend myself in your mouth.”

As he continued to kiss me, he tore the rest of the sundress away. It fluttered down my thighs then fell to the floor.

Now, I was naked before him. Completely bare.

More kisses. His hands couldn’t seem to decide what was a better idea: wandering over my body or tearing his own clothes away as well.

When we were both naked, Don kissed his way down my body. Every place where his lips met my skin burned in a way that lingered long after he’d moved on. His teeth scraped against the newly exposed skin of my thighs. I laced my fingers through his dark locks, massaging his scalp as, finally, he moved his kisses to my cunt again.

When he’d kissed me there earlier, I’d thought that it was impossible to want him more. But Don was quick to push that notion from my mind. He lifted one of my legs up and hooked my knee over his shoulder then drew back for a moment to breathe in the scent of the heady humidity between my legs.

“No woman has any right smelling so good,” he rasped before he dove between my thighs.

As he sucked my clit into his mouth, I gasped for him. I could hardly argue with his assessment of my smell.

I was wet enough, I could smell myself too. Dark and rich and deep, like rain-soaked earth.

He flicked his tongue against my swollen bud, sending tendrils of pleasure unfurling through me. I twisted my fingers in his hair, tugging his lips more firmly against my cunt.

“Don, please,” I whimpered. “I need you. All of you.”

He looked up at me, still sucking my clit. He was always gorgeous, but he looked even better with his mouth on my cunt.

Vibrations shuddered up through my pussy to my core as he groaned. With that sound, he licked a final stripe up my slit, and I watched his resolve die in the pools of his gray irises.

“Then you’ll have me, Bea.” His lips glistened with my nectar as he pulled away. “Just remember—you asked for this.”

He straightened and pinned me against the bookshelf. His hands wrapped around my hips to grab my ass and lift me up with his strength.

“Arch that back for me, darling.” His cock leapt up between my thighs, swiping between my pussy lips. When his tip throbbed against my clit, I could feel exactly how slick he’d gotten me. Now, his cock was slippery with my juices too. “Wrap those long legs of yours around my waist so I can fuck you the way you deserve.”

I obeyed his orders without a thought. I wanted this. I wanted *him*. Disobeying him now would almost certainly lead to punishment—which I wasn’t exactly opposed to.

But it would only slow us down.

My body was tense. Every muscle ached with desperation for release. I needed him inside of me. *Now*. If I didn’t have him, I truly felt like I’d die.

I arched my back. Just like he’d asked. I hugged his hips with my legs, holding him tight against me.

He held me up with only an arm around my back, pinned between the bookshelf and his body like I weighed nothing at all. With his free hand, he positioned his cock at my entrance.

Our eyes met for only a moment—then, he was inside me and the entire world burst into an even brighter wash of color as he forced every inch of his shaft into me with a single thrust.

“Don!” My mouth fell open in a gasp of sheer ecstasy. “Fuck!”

His cock had been thick enough to make my jaw ache when I’d sucked him just a few moments ago. But impossibly, it felt even thicker now. Heat pulsed through my body as he stretched my channel, molding it to his shape.

Don's teeth were gritted as he filled me. With a final, sharp thrust, his balls slapped against the curves of my ass as he bottomed out. His fingers dug into my shoulder and my hip like he was using my flesh to ground himself. Like if he let go of me for even a moment, he might come entirely undone.

"Your cunt's even hotter than that mouth of yours, kitten." His hips pulled back until only his tip remained inside me, then he entered me all over again. "So fucking tight you make my teeth ache."

With every thrust, my body adjusted to the sensation of being so full more and more. His hips rolled against me, setting rhythms that shifted just as I began to feel out their beat. The curve of his cock felt perfectly designed for stroking up against my G-spot. My moans grew deeper and the tension in my muscles expanded into something almost unbearable.

"Kiss me," I begged, and he did. Our tongues slicked against each other, tangling mercilessly.

Tenderness. Passion. Rough, raw desire—and yes, love. I felt it blooming in my core and bursting around my edges until the sheer force of it clouded my brain and sent my moans rocketing into cries just short of screams.

"Come for me, Bea. I know you fucking want it. Take it. Take every fucking inch of my thick, hard cock and let me hear you fucking come." His kisses shifted to my cheek, then my jaw, then my neck. Every single one of them felt so full of fire that for a moment, I was certain I was burning in the flames of Hell itself. "I've got you. You're mine. Now—let me watch you let go."

My knees quaked as a tingle shimmered through my body, rising up from my core. My cunt throbbed around him, clenching and unclenching rapidly until, just like he'd asked, I had no choice but to let go.

Rapture. Eruption. My pussy spasmed violently and my body followed its lead.

"Fuck," Don swore, a single, sharp word snarled from his gorgeous lips. When he pounded his length up into my depths next, his balls pressed against me, tighter than ever. "Fuck. Now take me with you, darling. Let me empty myself inside you. Passion of my life. Fire of my fucking soul."

I felt the first burst of his cum enter me, exploding hot and deep. Every inch of Don's cock filled me, barely even withdrawing enough to allow him to thrust back in. And between us, coating my channel and painting it

with white-hot pleasure, his seed flooded into every part of my cunt that his cock hadn't already claimed.

I squeezed my eyes shut and held onto him as tight as I could. Heat radiated all around us, like the warmth of a silky bubble bath after a long night in the cold. The final ropes of his cum shot into me, these ones far gentler than the first. I took every drop of it and clenched my pussy tight around him, desperate to hold his seed inside.

If any dripped out, I feared I'd just drop to my knees and lick it up off the floor.

"Bea?" Don breathed in my ear. "Bea."

I kept my eyes clenched shut as I nuzzled against his neck. I knew this moment would have to end eventually, but that only made him cling to him even tighter.

"Just stay inside me for a little while longer," I pleaded with him. Behind my eyes, everything felt blissfully floaty and light. My chest felt open, like the hinges of a door that had been shut for far too long had finally swung free. And best of all, as we held each other, that delicious heat between us crackled and purred just like—

"You're on fire, Bea."

I laughed. That was one way to put it, I guessed.

But then, after a moment, I opened my eyes and saw flames.

Real, actual flames.

They undulated around us, skimming along my skin. When I reached up to run my fingers through my hair, embers scattered from the strands of my waves.

On fire—I really was.

"Oh, fuck!" I swore, snapping back to reality. My eyes went wide with panic in an instant. *On fire*—that definitely wasn't good. "Don—the books!"

Don only chuckled. "Tell her she's on fire and she's only worried about what books might burn. You're a ridiculous woman, Bea—and I'm so fucking glad you're mine."

"But...fire burns books." The words felt even dumber than they sounded. I didn't imagine I needed to explain to him the mechanics of how libraries were burned to the ground, and yet...Don didn't seem nearly alarmed enough at the potential that any minute now, all his favorite novels might go up in flames.

“It burns pretty brides too,” Don reminded me, rolling his eyes. “The books will be fine, Bea—and even if they weren’t, better them than you.”

“It doesn’t hurt, though.” I stared down at the flames coming up off my skin. “Don...what in the name of Hell—”

“Exactly, Bea,” he said with a grin. “Remember—I did promise you gifts. This is one of them.”

“How?”

“We’re truly husband and wife now. The vows were only the half of it. The rest...” His cock twitched within me, still impossibly hard. “Well. You can figure that out for yourself.”

“So I can make...fire happen now?” I hoped Don would forgive how slow on the uptake I was being. To be fair, he must’ve fucked me pretty hard to leave me with so few brain cells in the aftermath.

“You can. We’ll have to train you to do it on demand, but... yes. My powers are yours now. The more you practice, the more they’ll grow. So. How does it feel?” he asked, stroking his fingers up my arm through the flames.

“Incredible.” I held my hand up between us, marveling at the way the fire licked against my skin without burning. “Like something that’s a part of me. Something I’ve needed for a very long time, without even knowing.”

The fire around us was gentle and burning. Incredible didn’t even come close to summing it up. It felt impossibly good and impossibly *right*.

And as Don kissed me again...

So did he.

DON

“**A**ll right.” I turned Bea’s hand over in mine and gave her the nod. “Let’s go again.”

“Do I have to?” Bea grimaced as she let her hand fall to her side. “I appreciate your continued faith in me, Don, but I’m beginning to suspect it’s poorly placed. I don’t think I’m any good at this.”

“Of course you are.” I crossed my arms over my chest and stood back several paces away from her. “You’re just not trying hard enough.”

“We’ve been at this for *hours*,” Bea groaned. “How the fuck can you say that?”

I smirked. She was cute when she whined like this. Pitiful and just the right kind of bratty. The Bea I knew rarely found reason to complain—usually, she naturally excelled at anything she tried her hand at—so seeing her pouting as she’d struggled to master her new powers over the last two weeks had been a rare treat.

Something about this made it all too tempting to take her over my knee until she did what I wanted.

Maybe I’d have to.

Maybe she’d even like it.

“I know that you’re capable of summoning flames between those pretty fingers of yours, Bea. I’ve seen you do it with my own eyes. So, what’s holding you back now?”

“You’ve seen me do it in *bed*, you asshole.” Bea clenched her fists and glowered at me. “I can’t do it here.”

I rested my elbow on my fist and dragged my thumb across my lower lip as I stared her down. “We could change locations if you think it would help.”

“Oh, you’d *love* that, wouldn’t you?” She crossed her arms over her chest and looked away haughtily. “You’re loving this right now too. Don’t lie. I can tell how much it’s amusing you, watching me fail.”

Gently, I snorted.

She wasn’t wrong.

“Am I frustrating you, Bea?”

“You always frustrate me.” A soft blush rose up on Bea’s cheeks. “In various ways.”

I took a step closer to her. “Maybe I’m just trying to make you angry. Has that occurred to you?”

“Well, it’s working,” she snapped back at me. Her eyes were full of flame as she met my gaze again. “Proud of yourself?”

“Almost.”

I took another step closer, then another. I wanted to pull all that flame from her eyes and put it in the palm of her hand instead. I’d tried everything else so far. Patience. Praise. Encouragement. But if those had been things that Bea needed from me, they would have worked.

We’d need to leave the Abyss soon. The honeymoon was ending, and when it was over, Bea would need to return to Earth. Her life there, her family, her friends, her career—these things mattered to her. These few weeks had been a blissful reprieve from it all, but her world didn’t stop turning just because she had a price on her head.

I would go with her when she went, offering her all the protection that a man like myself could provide. I’d watch over her. I’d keep her safe. She’d already agreed to that much.

But before we left my domain, I wanted her to have protections of her own first.

One way or another, she was going to give me what I wanted.

It was time to try something new.

“You’re a spoiled little girl, Bea.” I took her throat in my hand and gently squeezed it. My eyes glimmered teasingly, but the darkness behind

them was sharp and deep and barely contained. “An incorrigible, hot-cunted brat.”

“And you’re a cruel bastard,” she snipped back at me—but I saw something flash through her own dark eyes that took the venom from her voice by half as she grabbed my wrist. “Just because I’m your wife doesn’t mean I have to do everything you command. If I’m telling you that I can’t do this, it means I fucking *can’t*.”

She tried to pull my hand away from her throat and I laughed. She was as strong as she was stubborn, but I was stronger. She gasped as I only tightened my grip.

“I know you, kitten.” My voice dropped to a black velvet whisper. “I know you better than anyone. Whether you want to admit it or not.”

She let out a long, slow breath. “You don’t know me at all.”

“No?” I moved my free hand between her legs, cupping her pussy through the thin fabric of her sundress. Bea’s eyelashes fluttered rapidly as she closed her eyes. Instinctively, she leaned into my touch. “I know I’ve just made your cunt throb so hard that it’s practically dripping down your thighs.”

Her eyes flashed open again in an instant. She glared daggers up at me. “No. You haven’t. It’s not.”

“Liar.” I leaned in, looming down over her until my lips were just inches away from hers. “You’re fucking swimming in it, Bea. You might be able to fool everyone else, but you can’t fool me.”

“Is that so?” she said through her teeth. “And how am I trying to fool you, exactly?”

“Playing like you can’t do this when I know you can. Unless...” I tilted my head to the side and narrowed my eyes. My fingers slipped between the lips of her cunt, pressing down on her clit through the fabric of her sundress. No panties today—that was a bit of information I’d keep in mind for when we were done. “Are you really only able to let go of your inhibitions when I’m making you come?”

“Fuck you,” Bea panted. She was trembling—half with arousal, half with rage.

I smirked in the way I knew really got her blood boiling and stole a rough kiss, conquering her lips. When she pulled away, snarling against my lips, I only leaned in closer.

She couldn't free herself from me that easily. Not until she'd given me what I needed from her—what we *both* needed if she was going to be able to protect herself in the days to come.

"Maybe I should," I suggested when I finally allowed her to break our kiss. "Maybe I should throw you down right here and have you in the dirt. Is that what you want?"

"I want you to stop fucking needling me, you arrogant *prick*." With that final word, Bea raised a hand to my chest and shoved me backwards. Her other hand flew up in front of my face, shaking hard with fury.

I felt the heat coming off her palm a mere moment before I spotted the flame. Had I been even half a second slower, when the fire began to spiral out from between her head line and her life line, she would have singed my eyebrows off in an instant, and temporarily blinded me on top of it.

Instead, I jerked my head to the side just in time. The air shimmered with searing heat as Bea shot a column of hellfire just a few inches away from my cheek.

Good. Yes. That's my girl.

I almost smiled. But I wasn't done with her yet—

And she was far too pissed off now to be done with me.

She shifted her hand when she realized that she'd missed. I wasn't sure that it had even hit her yet how well she was doing—I'd pushed her over the edge too completely for that. I ducked her next attack, moving with demonic speed and focused precision. If she really wanted to hurt me, she'd have to try much harder than that.

Her shoulders heaved as I snatched her wrists up in my hands. Her eyes were dark. Her lips were curled. Her hair fell down over her shoulders in deep, silken waves that rippled of their own accord.

She was dangerous, and she was beautiful. And best of all—

She was *mine*.

All fucking mine.

She tried to spin away from me. With all of her weight, she jerked her body from mine as she tried once again to break my hold on her.

I wasn't about to let her get away now, though. I pulled her back towards me and wrapped her up in my arms, too tight for her struggles to mean anything.

Together, we tumbled to the ground.

I rolled our bodies so that mine would bear the brunt of the fall. My shoulder hit the grass first, then the rest of me as I used my momentum to throw myself on top of her, pinning her down.

“Bastard!” she roared at me.

“Yes,” I agreed. “I am. But, darling—”

“What?”

“You did it,” I pointed out calmly.

“Did what? I want to *kill* you, not—”

“Bea. Take a breath.” I waited for a little of that fire in her eyes to recede once more, then smiled. “If you’ll stop raging at me for a moment, I think you’ll realize you just made flames.”

I laughed as she blinked up at me.

I’d been right. She’d been so angry that she hadn’t even clocked what she’d just done.

“Well...good.” Bea’s chest rose and fell as she panted beneath me.

“Are you happy?”

Slowly, I nodded, staring down at her with pleasure. “You did well, darling. Why wouldn’t I be?”

“Good.” She bit her lip, and I watched the fury fading into exhaustion in her eyes. “I’m glad. You finally got what you wanted, didn’t you?”

“Poor thing.” I laughed again and placed a kiss on her forehead. She was slick with sweat from exertion. As I pulled back, I licked her salt from my lips. “I’m glad that you’ve figured out how to defend yourself, yes. But you’re here with me, and you’re safe, and you’re mine. I already had everything I could ever want before we began.”

“You’re being too sweet.” Bea’s eyes narrowed. “What are you angling for now?”

“I don’t have to angle for anything with you, Bea.” I took her hand in mine, then brought it up to my lips so I could kiss her fingers. They were still warm from the flames. “You’re not a difficult woman to charm.”

Bea smiled and sighed with acceptance. “Not when it comes to you, I suppose. Let’s just hope the other humans are of similar mind when we get back to Earth.”

“They will be,” I assured her. “And if they’re not...well, we can fight fire with fire now, can’t we?”

“Is that your plan?” Bea arched an eyebrow and shifted her hips beneath mine. “Entering the Leviathan Financial offices, guns blazing

unless they bow down to you and kiss your feet?”

“It’d be rude of them not to,” I joked. Her body felt so right beneath mine like this. Firm and warm and sweet. “As king of Hell, I deserve no less.”

“And what does the queen of Hell deserve? I’m royalty too now, aren’t I?”

“You were born a queen, Bea,” I assured her. “As for what you deserve—the entire universe, if you’re leaving it up to me. Barring that...I think the respect of the investors at Leviathan is a good place to start.”

Bea laughed. “I wish I could say our meeting at Leviathan was my biggest worry about going back, you know.”

I pulled back, a little surprised. “Is it not?”

“Of course it isn’t. I’ve been preparing to take over Leviathan for my entire life. It’s what I was raised for. What I went through all those years of college for.” She closed her eyes and let out a satisfied breath. “And it’ll be even easier now with you by my side instead of Simon. He was never very business-minded, believe it or not.”

“Oh, I believe it.” I stroked my thumb down her cheekbone, relishing the angles of her face. “What are you worried for, then? More demon assassins?”

I wouldn’t have blamed her if that was the case. It was exactly why I’d pushed her so hard today—and she hadn’t let me down.

“Honestly... I trust you, Don. If I can’t protect myself with all this new power you’ve given me, I know you’ll step in and keep me safe.”

“You’re right.” She was. I wouldn’t even hesitate. “So what, then? What terrible worry troubles your pretty mind?”

“Well... Are you sure you’re prepared to face my parents again?” Bea asked, staring up at me. She brushed her fingers through my hair, and I leaned into her touch. “They were on their best behavior at my wedding—but that isn’t always the case.”

“I’ve charmed your parents once already,” I reminded her with a smile. “Doing it again won’t be hard.”

“And you’re sure that you’ll be able to manage yourself over the course of an entire dinner?” Her fingers brushed against my chest, stirring my heartbeat to pick up its pace. “If you end up bending me over the table halfway through the salad course, I can assure you—my parents won’t find it charming in the least.”

A smile curled onto my lips as my cock stiffened. Now *there* was an interesting notion. A pretty picture too. Bea, bent over a dinner table with her skirt hiked up around her waist, wine bottles crashing over as I took her.

That was certainly an idea I could get behind.

“I’m sure I’ll find some way to contain myself,” I purred against her neck in between hot, humid kisses. “We’ll just have to skip dessert.”

“Skip dessert?” Bea grabbed my head and pulled it up, forcing me to look her in the eyes. “But that’s the best part!”

“True,” I agreed, moving my lips to hover over her mouth instead. When I kissed her, I knew my body would demand that I fucked her here in the courtyard all over again. Already, my fingers were trailing up her thigh, preparing to force her skirt aside. She was right—around her, managing myself was a difficult thing indeed. “But as sweet as pie and ice cream is, kitten—you’re far sweeter.” I nipped at her lower lip, pulling back nice and slow as I released it. “Think I’d much rather eat you for dessert instead.”

BEA

The next afternoon, we walked through the Abyss like two lovers strolling through a park. Don kept his arm around me, keeping me close. I held the hand he had draped over my shoulder. My other arm was wound around his waist.

Wherever we walked, the world colored in.

We'd spent the two weeks of our honeymoon here in the Abyss. That first morning, I'd been afraid that Don would never let me return to my life on Earth at all. But now that we were leaving, I was a little sad to go.

My life on Earth involved a lot of boring dinners and dense paperwork. I'd spent most of my time doing Simon's work for him, laughing at the jokes of rich men who weren't all that funny and appeasing clients who were too busy staring at my tits to learn my name. Ever since Simon had finally made our engagement official, planning the wedding had eaten up everything that was left of my free time.

But now, as crazy as it was to admit, it felt like I had a true partner. A *real* husband. Tonight, at dinner with my parents, Don would have to return to the glamor that made him look like Simon—but he *wasn't* Simon, and now that I knew him better, I could see exactly how much of a good thing that was.

"Are you excited to see your parents again?" Don asked. "You've barely spoken with them since the wedding."

“That was on purpose,” I admitted. “My parents are nice enough, but we’re not exactly...close.”

“I’m sorry,” he said. He even sounded genuine about it.

But his sympathies were a little misplaced.

“You shouldn’t be. Like I said, they were always kind enough to me when I was growing up.” I hadn’t been blessed with loving parents like Ava, but at least I wasn’t an orphan like Joan. “My mother is a sweetheart, don’t get me wrong, but she gave up a modeling career to marry my dad. I’m not sure she ever really *wanted* to be a mom. And my dad was gone on business so often, sometimes it was kind of like I didn’t have one.”

“Mm.” Don hummed gently, nodding along. “Yes. I know exactly how you feel.”

“Do you?” Don and I had spent a lot of time getting to know each other over the last two weeks, but an awful lot of that had involved being naked together in bed. The subject of our parents hadn’t really come up.

I hadn’t even realized that demons had parents at all.

“My mother is one of the Fallen—the angels that followed Lucifer when he rebelled against heaven,” Don explained. “Her name is Belial, and she’s not exactly the mothering type either. I’m not sure who my father is. I don’t think my mother even knows—if she does, she never mentioned it.”

“I see what you mean.” A fallen angel mother *and* an absent father? I wished I could say that I couldn’t imagine what that had been like, but from the sounds of things, I might have known a little too well. “You and I are an awful lot alike, huh?”

“More than you know.” Don pressed a kiss to my temple. “And even more now that we’re husband and wife.”

I smiled at that.

Don was still a bastard, but he was a good husband. I hoped I’d make a good wife in return.

“Do you have any siblings?” I asked, curious to learn more now. “I’m an only child. I guess Mom never wanted more than one.”

“I have a brother,” Don revealed. “Malacoda. Mal for short. He and your friend Ava... ah. They have history together, just like you and I do.”

“They do?” I blinked, surprised. “She’s never mentioned it. And believe me, if she’d been with anyone—especially a *demon*—she definitely would have said.”

I wouldn't tell Don about Ava's sex life—that was her business. Not mine to share. But the subject of her virginity had been a regular topic in our girl talk. Once, when she was a little tipsy, she'd even revealed to me that she didn't go all the way with her boyfriends because she was convinced she was cursed, of all things.

I'd laughed it off at the time, but knowing what I did now about the existence of angels and demons...maybe she hadn't been joking.

Now, even the silliest of superstitions seemed a lot more real.

But if she'd fucked a demon, it definitely would have come up.

"She's had her memory taken as well. Just like yours. Joan's, too. All three of you had your minds wiped of all knowledge of Heaven and Hell."

"To maintain the balance between all of the realms. Right." We'd gone over this a few times, but I'd never managed to entirely wrap my head around the specifics of it. "I know that for the whole time we were together, the angels were trying to keep us apart, but...what changed? How did they finally win?"

"They didn't, actually. They lost."

"What?" I trusted Don now, but even within that trust...what he was saying didn't make a lot of sense. "But if they lost..."

"You and I weren't the only ones they were targeting. You had a third friend—Evie. I suppose somewhere in Vermont, you still do."

"Evie..." The name sounded familiar. Like an old favorite song that I'd forgotten the words to, even though I still knew the tune. "Did I forget her too, then?"

Some friend I was. BFFs kind of lost its meaning when your friends' memories could be wiped by angelic beings at any turn.

"You had to, I'm afraid. When I met you in Las Vegas, you were there to celebrate Evie's wedding. It's almost funny, actually." Don shrugged. "She was there to marry a different man entirely. But he cheated on her, and she fell in love with Lucifer that same night. She ended up marrying him instead."

"Lucifer...like *the* Lucifer?"

"The one and only."

"I guess I'm not really in a position to judge, but... Meeting and marrying the Devil on the same night—especially when she'd just been jilted by her fiancé right before their wedding..." I really *couldn't* judge her, given the situation that Don and I were in now. But it was worth

asking about. I was curious to learn what kind of person Evie really was. “Did she always move so fast?”

“She very much didn’t,” Don assured me. “But the angels had it out for Evie, and she and Lucifer are like us. Reincarnated throughout the ages. Destined to fall in love across many lifetimes—only, where I’ve only known you once before, they’ve had hundreds of lives together.” Don sighed. “All of them ending in Evie’s death, unfortunately. Until this one.”

“That’s tragic,” I whispered. It really was. Being born over and over again, falling in love and then being torn apart—it wasn’t *fair*. “The angels wanted Evie dead too, then?”

“They did,” said Don. “There was a prophecy. One that none of us are sure is even real anymore. It told the angels that any child born of Lucifer would bring about the end of the world—and there was no one he would ever have a child with other than her.”

“But they managed it this time around,” I guessed. “That’s what changed.”

“Exactly. Hell had a version of the same prophecy the angels knew, but it said that the child would only bring about change. We came to an agreement with the angels—that Lucifer and Evie would be free to raise their child in a way that would ensure those changes were good ones. But in exchange...”

“Ava, Joan and I had to forget everything.” *To keep everything in balance*. That didn’t seem fair either—but I supposed if the fate of the entire world was at stake, it was a sacrifice that I hadn’t been given much of a choice about.

And to ensure the safety of Evie and her baby... It was one that I’d been willing to make.

It was strange, hearing about a friend that I couldn’t remember. As far as I could recall, it had been Ava and Joan and me ever since we’d first met during undergrad. Sometimes, yes, it felt like there was something missing. When I thought back to the time we’d gone to Vegas together, I honestly couldn’t recall why we’d gone in the first place.

Now, I supposed I knew. Evie’s wedding. An actual, honest-to-god marriage to the Devil. In a weird way, it actually made sense.

“I wish I hadn’t forgotten her,” I said softly. “It sounds like we were good friends.”

“You were,” Don said with a chuckle. “Damn near inseparable, actually. All four of you were.”

“And now...she has a baby.” I wished I hadn’t forgotten that, either. It would have been nice, having a close friend with a child. “How old?”

“She’s probably nearing two years, now. Lily, they’ve named her. Evie went into labor right before your memories were taken. Lucifer and Evie abdicated in favor of Mal, Lock and me once Lily was born. Now, they all live near Evie’s parents in Vermont—as far away from Hell as they could get.”

“Well, that prophecy was definitely right about one thing—it sounds like Lily really did change things.” The loss of my memories. Don’s ascension to the throne of hell. For starters, at least.

“Babies always do,” Don agreed.

I pursed my lips as we continued to walk along to the place where Don could open the portal to my parents’ estate.

He was right—babies *did* change things. It made me wonder, though... what would happen if *I* got pregnant?

I’d gone off birth control right after Simon had proposed. Not because I was preparing myself for my new husband or anything—it had just started making me moody. My doctor suspected it had something to do with all of the wedding planning stress. If anything, I’d been under the impression that I’d never need protection like that ever again.

I certainly hadn’t been planning on fucking Simon, and he’d mentioned enough times that he didn’t want me dating once we were married that I hadn’t expected to have sex ever again. Or, at least, not for a very long time.

I didn’t even know if demons could even *have* babies with humans. Could a human woman like me actually get pregnant off of demon semen?

I guessed if the Devil had managed to get a human pregnant, anything was possible. Could Don and I do the same?

Maybe so.

Don and I hadn’t exactly been using condoms during all of our romps here in the Abyss. And as far as time went...I knew that two weeks had passed on Earth, but sometimes here in the Abyss days stretched on for so much longer than twenty-four hours. Nights seemed longer too. Especially when I was naked in bed with Don.

There was no telling where I was at in my cycle now. I wasn't even sure how to calculate it—or if time even existed at all in the Abyss.

“God.” My knees were a little weak just thinking about it. “You don’t think *I’m* pregnant, do you?”

Don smiled down at me. “Would it be so bad if you were?”

A laugh escaped my throat. He couldn’t be serious.

That certainly wasn’t the answer I’d been expecting, at any rate.

“What’s so funny?” His brow furrowed as he brought me to a stop. “We’re married. We’re good at it, too. You’d make a good mother, and I’ve always liked the idea of having a child. There’s no one I’d rather raise one with than you.”

“We barely know each other, Don,” I pointed out. “The last two weeks...I can’t complain. They’ve been beautiful. All of the time we’ve spent together—even the time we’ve spent bickering—I’ve enjoyed.”

“But?”

“But I only just now learned you have a brother. I don’t even know enough about you to know what I don’t know.” I frowned. “If that makes sense.”

“It does,” Don said softly. “And it doesn’t. For you, this has just been two weeks together. For me, though...it’s the continuation of more than a year together. And before that, centuries ago, even more time. I feel like I’ve loved you my entire life. For so much of it, I truly have.”

“You... you love me?” My breath caught in my chest as the word resonated through my mind. I’d heard him say it in that first memory he’d stirred in me. I’d said it, too. But all of that...it felt like it had happened a lifetime ago for me. Almost like it had happened to someone else entirely. “You mean that?”

“You may not remember all of our time together, Bea, but I recall every moment perfectly.” Don took his hands in mine and stared down at me, serious for a moment. “I’ve loved you through all of it. Even when you were lost to me, I loved you still. I remember every kiss, every touch, every word you’ve ever said to me. So, yes, I love you.” He laughed, shaking his head. “I couldn’t forget you if I tried.”

“That’s...really, really sweet.” It honestly was. Back when I’d believed in love as a child, it was the kind of thing I’d always imagined a man saying to me. And now that Don was in my life...maybe I’d never stopped believing. Maybe I’d only forgotten. “I wish I could remember you, too.”

Don hesitated for a moment, then brought my hands up to his chest. Against my knuckles, I could feel his heartbeat. Steady and strong. “Do you want me to show you? I can, if you like.”

Two weeks ago, that offer would have terrified me. I wouldn’t have been able to know with certainty what was real and what was a lie.

But now, Don had earned my trust. More than anyone else ever had in all my life.

“Of course I do.” I nodded and squeezed his hands. “Please.”

“What do you want to see?” Don asked.

“Everything,” I said immediately. “I want to see it all.”

He smiled, then kissed me.

In an instant, it all came flooding back in.

BEA*Somewhere in a memory...*

The room smelled like coffee and old books and good booze. Up on a stage, “Purple Rain” was being played by a man who bore a striking resemblance to Prince himself—and beneath me, there was Don.

His arms were around me, and I didn’t want them there...and at the same time, I absolutely did. I didn’t often sit on the laps of strange men, but then again, strange men rarely looked even half as good as him.

Besides—I hadn’t had much of a choice. When I’d stood up to offer him my armchair, he’d grabbed my wrist and pulled me down on top of him without even bothering to ask.

“You should dance with me,” he purred in my ear. “I bet you’re good at it.”

I glanced to the open floor just in front of the stage. On it, a beautiful blonde—Evie—was dancing with a tall, dark-haired man. Lucifer. Luke. Her husband. And if everything else I’d seen over the last few days was to be believed, the Devil himself as well.

“I’m great at it,” I told the man beneath me. *Don*, he’d called himself. I knew he was a demon, but it was hardly the name of any demon I’d ever heard of before. “But that doesn’t mean I want to dance with *you*.”

“You could see if Ava or Joan would trade you partners, if you like.” Don nodded to the others on the dance floor. Ava was giggling and blushing furiously as a brown-haired man led her in a bumbling two-step. Joan was deeply engaged in a tango with a man of her own—this one, bearing a ruddy-colored beard. “But they look rather occupied if you ask me—and you hardly seem like the type to sit on the sidelines while your friends have all the fun.”

What I should have said was: *I’m perfectly happy sitting this one out, thank you.* Then, I should have moved to one of the other chairs. There were plenty empty, now that everyone else had gotten up to dance.

Instead, when I rose up off of Don’s lap, I turned and offered him my hand.

“Okay,” I said. “But don’t go trying to charm me. I know far too many men like you already—and I can assure you, you’re not my type.”

Which was a lie. Unfortunately for me, with his gray eyes and black hair and chiseled jawline, he was *exactly* my type.

“Duly noted,” Don said as he took my hand. “But I can assure you, darling—you don’t know any men like me at all.”

THE SCENE FADED, but I knew how it ended. Gently swaying to beautiful music, dancing in Don’s arms and being held much, *much* too close.

“IS THIS SEAT TAKEN?”

I was in Limbo, the bar on the first floor of the Inferno. I didn’t even have to look up from the book I was currently devouring—*Wuthering Heights*—to know exactly who was asking.

With a voice like his, deep and silky smooth and even darker than the pint of Guinness I was currently working on, it could only be one man.

“Even if it was, would it matter?” I asked as I glanced up at Don. He wore a white dress shirt, black slacks and no tie. Somehow, being dressed down like this only made him look even more commanding than he would have been in a full suit.

“Not in the least,” he said as he slipped onto the barstool next to me. “But if you’re here with someone, I’m perfectly happy to tell him to fuck off.”

“I’m here alone,” I assured him, gesturing to the book. That way, he knew exactly what a nice thing he was tearing me away from by imposing his presence on me right now. “But before you get any wicked ideas—”

“I only have wicked ones, I’m afraid. Perks of being a demon and all.”

“I’m already promised to someone,” I told him pointedly. “Even hellhounds must realize when they’re barking up the wrong tree.”

“I don’t see a ring on your finger.” He inclined his head toward my hand.

Quickly, I removed that hand from the bar and placed it in my lap instead.

“We’re not engaged yet.”

“So you’re letting some man who isn’t even your fiancé yet tell you who you can and can’t talk to?”

I scowled. That was a big accusation, coming from a man who answered to the commands of the Devil himself.

“I can talk to whoever I like,” I said. “No man tells me what to do.”

“Sounds like at least one does.” Don shrugged as his gray eyes glimmered, locked on mine.

They were the kind of eyes that were far too easy to get lost in. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn’t manage to tear my gaze away.

“You’re wrong,” I whispered. “I can do whatever I want.”

“Can you?” Don smirked. “Prove it.”

His lips looked so enticing, I was moving for them before I even had time to consider what a bad idea kissing him was.

When I pulled away, his smirk only widened.

Then, he took my face in his hands and pulled me back in for another kiss—an even deeper one. My pulse raced as his tongue moved against mine. Desire pounded through me, starting in my chest and reverberating through my cunt.

JUST LIKE THAT, I knew exactly the moment when Don had laid claim to my body.

Next, I knew, he’d stolen my heart.

I WAS in his bed in Nevermore Manor, naked beneath his cold, silken sheets. The muscles of Don’s back rippled gorgeously as he fastened his

belt.

His scent was still on my skin. Earthy and rich. The smell of good sex. With Don, it always was.

“Do you think the others have realized that we’re fucking yet?” I asked, not eager to leave the bed just yet. It was too soft and watching Don get dressed was almost as fun as watching him take his clothes off.

Almost.

“Lucifer probably does. Sin rarely goes unnoticed by him.” Don turned to me with a smile on his lips. It was teasing—like he knew something I didn’t. “Is there a reason you don’t want them all to know?”

I licked my lips. Of course there was.

I was falling for him and I knew it. I’d been falling for a while now, and if I even came close to admitting it, it would make everything far too real.

No matter how I felt about Don, I’d still have to marry Simon in end. When I did, I’d lose Don. Not just for a month or a year, but forever.

Telling him—or anyone else, for that matter—how I really felt...

It would hurt way too much.

THAT WAS the thing about falling, I was quickly realizing.

No matter what I did, when I finally hit the ground, I knew it would hurt.

THERE WAS a tear in the universe sitting in the middle of my living room in Los Angeles. Through it, Don stumbled out of the Abyss. His hair was messy. His shirt was torn. He had a hand folded over his ribs. Beneath it, the white linen was stained dark with glittering demonic blood.

“Don!” I leapt up from the couch and rushed to his side immediately. He leaned on me as I led him over to the couch and laid him down. “What happened? Why are you bleeding?”

“Angels. Why else?” he rasped. His eyes met mine for a moment. He looked tired. These days, with the way the angels had been ramping up the frequency of their attacks, we all were. “Tried to follow me here. Managed to shake them, though. Don’t suppose you have anything to drink?”

“Wine,” I admitted. “But I don’t think that’s going to disinfect that wound.”

"I don't need it for that." Don's chest was heaving. He was obviously in pain. But when he pulled his hand away from his wound, I could see that it was already healing on its own. Soon, it'd be completely closed. "I promised you a date though, didn't I?"

"I suppose you did." I rose and got the bottle, along with two glasses. "Looks like we're staying in tonight."

"Safer that way," Don grunted. "Do you mind?"

"Not at all." As much as I enjoyed our nights out, I liked our nights in even more. Thanks to Don's efforts, the angels didn't know where I lived yet. It was best if we kept them that way. "But..."

"If you want a man who can take you out on the town without the risk of being stabbed, darling, you're going to have to look for love elsewhere."

I shook my head and threw my leg over his hips, straddling him on the couch.

"I don't know about love." *I did.* That was a lie. "But I only want you. I'm just a little concerned, is all."

"About?"

"Is all of this worth it?"

Don laughed, then winced. It looked like laughter would be something that hurt until his wound finished healing.

"Pour the wine, Bea," he commanded, brushing my hair behind my ear. "If you're only going to ask questions you already know the answer to, I can think of a few better uses for that pretty mouth."

THE MEMORY SWIRLED AWAY, and immediately I was launched into the next.

He was right, though. I did know the answer.

Was it worth it?

Of course it was.

THE HALLS OF PANDEMONIUM, Lucifer's castle in the center of Hell, were vast and empty. Every demon and devil was up on Earth right now, battling for the fate of my best friend's life—and the life of her child as well.

Unfortunately, I couldn't find Evie either right now.

“Eves?” I poked my head into yet another empty room. She wasn’t there. She wasn’t *anywhere*. Joan, Ava and I had come here to be safe with her while the battle raged above, but she’d wandered off nearly an hour ago.

Now, she was nowhere to be found.

“Bea.” It wasn’t Evie’s voice that called out to me from the hall at my back.

It was Don’s.

I turned to the sound immediately. Down the hall, Don was covered in blood. Some white and angelic, some black. His own. My chest panged as I saw the cut across his cheek and the wounds on his chest.

When I saw the look in his eyes, empty and desperate, my heart broke.

“No,” I breathed, running to him. “What happened? Did we lose?”

“We won,” Don panted. He took me into his arms and held me tight against his chest. As I pressed my cheek over his heart, I could feel it racing. “It’s all over. Evie’s safe. We won.”

“Then what’s wrong?” I pulled back to take his face in my hands. His eyes looked almost haunted, and the ache in my chest didn’t cease. “Don. Tell me what’s wrong.”

“Every win comes at a cost, Bea.” He shook his head. His eyes were shining with tears. I could tell how badly he wanted to look away so I wouldn’t see him crying, but he held my gaze like he was looking into my eyes for the last time. “Some bigger than others.”

“I’m losing you, aren’t I?” My breath caught in my throat. Heat seared through my sinuses as tears welled up in my eyes as well. “Don, tell me I’m wrong. I can’t lose you. Not now.”

“You can, and you will, darling.” Don raised his hand to my cheek and dragged his thumb across my skin, hard enough that it felt like he was trying to bruise me. I welcomed it. Gladly. If it meant that I could keep him near me, he could be as rough as he liked.

“I won’t,” I insisted. “I’m yours and you’re mine. Forever. When I told you I loved you, I meant it.”

“We cut a deal, Bea,” Don said mournfully. “We had no other choice.”

“Why?” I snarled at him. Tears were streaming down my face now. They shone on Don’s cheeks as well. “What could the angels possibly want with us?”

“Not us, Bea. Just you. Your memories of me in exchange for Evie’s life, and the life of her child. It’s not fair, but—”

The anger fell from my face in an instant.

“No,” I rasped with acceptance. The love of my life for the lives of my best friend and her baby. It would hurt, but yes—now, I understood. “It’s fair. If you had no choice—”

“We didn’t,” he swore. “I would never give you up if there had been any other way.”

I rested my head against him so he couldn’t see the sob tear through my chest.

“I love you.” My words were ruined by my crying, but if there was any moment to cry, it was now. “I’m always going to love you, Don.”

“I know, darling. I love you too. I always will.” Don took my chin between his fingers and turned my face up to his. “Now, kiss me, Bea. Make it a good one. We don’t have much time.”

My lips struggled to hold a pucker, but I crushed them against Don’s anyway. Our mouths twisted with pain as we clung to each other. Our tears mingled until I couldn’t tell which were his, and which were my own.

It was long kiss. A passionate one.

But I knew it was the last time I’d ever feel Don’s lips against mine.

No kiss could ever last long enough.

DON

When Bea came back to me this time, she was crying. She didn't try to hide it. Her eyes snapped open, searching desperately for mine. Her pain was visceral to me as the tears streamed down her face.

I felt it too. Losing Bea wasn't a memory I enjoyed reliving, but she'd asked for everything and I'd given it to her.

From our first meeting to our last.

"Are you all right, darling?" I took her face in my hands and used my thumbs to wipe her tears away. "Tell me how you feel."

"Overwhelmed," she said, sniffing. She turned her face away as she rubbed at her eyes. Her adorable little nose was swollen and pink at its tip. Her eyes were puffy and a little bloodshot—and still, she was the most beautiful woman I'd ever seen. "Sorry. I'm not meaning to cry."

"You don't need to hide from me, Bea." I smoothed her hair down and pulled her closer to me. Right now, I couldn't have her close enough. "It's all right."

Bea drew in a long breath then let it back out. "It is now. It's all true, isn't it?" Her gaze wandered back up to meet mine. "We fell in love. We were happy."

"We were." I wrapped my arms around her and held her tight. She didn't resist. Instead, she nuzzled her cheek against my chest like she'd found comfort there. It made my heart ache all over again. When her memories had been taken, we'd come so close to never having each other

at all. But Bea was correct. It was all okay now. I'd make sure that would never change. "I'm sorry that hurt you, but I'm glad you know."

"It didn't hurt me," she murmured against my chest. "Or, it did, but I think it's better now."

"I'd never hurt you, Bea."

She breathed a laugh. "Hurting me... I don't think you can." She met my gaze once more as she pulled back. "I love you, Don. I'm sorry I ever forgot."

I love you. Those three little words could have so little meaning between humans. But while others bastardized them, threw them around so carelessly, used them when they didn't mean them to manipulate and falsify—when Bea said them, warmth radiated through my chest.

When Bea said those words, she meant them.

They were true.

"You don't have to be sorry for anything, kitten," I promised her. "None of this has been your fault."

"I'm not so sure." Bea bit her lip, frowning. "My memories were taken to fulfill the deal you made with the angels, Don. I know now how serious that was. I love you, but I loved Evie and her baby too. I gave you up to keep them safe. And now, all this time, we could have been putting them in danger all over again."

"Bea, I would never," I assured her. "I care for Evie and her baby too. The angels won't hurt an innocent child. Even if we'd lost that battle, they only wanted to take Lily to Heaven so they could raise her there."

"Then why—"

"I told you that the prophecies about Lily said she would change things. Even when she was only in the womb, strange things were beginning to happen on Earth."

"I remember that," Bea said softly. "There was talk of civil war in Canada for a while a few years back, and the Sahara...it's still in bloom. That was all Lily's doing?"

"Maybe," I said. "We can't be sure. But if it wasn't—if it was, say, the result of four humans being all tied up in the affairs of Hell instead—the angels wanted to hedge their bets. Eliminate as many variables as they could."

"What do you think the angels will do when they find out that you've broken the deal, then?"

"I'm sure there will be repercussions for you and me when they find out," I admitted. "Which is why I think it's for the best that they don't. I'm more worried about demons than angels right now, anyway."

"Right. I guess that's true." Bea nodded and glanced to the side.

In the distance, the dim gray outline of the gates outside of her parents' estate loomed on the horizon. When she was ready, I would open the portal back to Earth. Thanks to Charon, one of Simon's many cars would be waiting for us there so we could arrive at the manor convincingly as we resumed our little act.

"Are you nervous?" I asked her.

Given the danger that Simon had put her in back on Earth, she had every right to be.

"A little," she admitted. "But I know you'll keep me safe."

"You're right. I will." I let my hands slide from her body as I turned to pull the veil between the realms apart once more. I took her fingers between mine as we stepped through.

Back to Earth.

The car was a '67 Mustang, pitch black with a leather interior the color of the foam on top of a well-poured espresso. I drew Bea around the side of it and opened the passenger door for her.

She sat down inside but stared up at me for a moment before she swung her legs in behind her.

"Do you think it was worth it, Don?" Her eyes shone with an innocent vulnerability.

"Was what worth it, kitten?" I knew the answer already—yes. Anything I did for her would always be worth it to me.

"Losing me. Giving me up, just to take me back."

"I didn't expect to reclaim you when you lost your memories, Bea," I admitted. "In the moment, that felt as real to me as it did to you."

What I meant was: *it had torn my fucking soul apart.*

"Why did you take me back, then?" she asked. "Just because of Simon's deal with that demon. To save my life?"

I crouched down and rested my hands on her pretty knees where they poked out from beneath the hem of her sundress. My lips curled into a soft smile.

"Partly," I admitted. It was true that Simon had given me an excellent excuse. "And partly so I could do this again."

I rose up and kissed her hard, pressing her body against the Mustang's passenger seat and running my fingers through her hair.

Yes, I had lost her, and yes, I had taken her back. That was how it must have seemed to Bea, anyway.

But the real truth of the matter was, even when she was away from me, she was by my side. The memory of her had haunted my bed in her absence. She'd been there in my dreams when I slept. When I was awake, she was never far from my mind.

In many ways—the important ones—I'd never lost her at all.

If I had any say in the matter, I never would again.

DON

“I’ll warn you now, I’m going to drink an entire bottle of wine before the dessert course,” Bea told me as we came down from her room dressed for dinner. We’d already exchanged the pleasantries with her parents. As expected, charming them had been as easy as drinking water and breathing air.

“Hoping I’ll have to carry you back up to bed?” I smirked down at her. It was a tempting idea. I rather liked having an excuse to hold her in my arms.

“Maybe,” Bea’s gaze flickered over to me. There was a smirk on her lips as well, but it faded too quickly. “But in reality, drinking is usually just the easiest way to make these dinners with my parents pass as quickly as possible. If you’re smart, you’ll join me.”

“Tempting.” Stumbling back up to Bea’s room together, drunk on wine and even drunker on each other, was a lovely thing to imagine. But I didn’t like the idea of her drinking away an entire evening just to escape it. Not while I was near. “But I have a different proposal, if you’re willing to hear it.”

“From you? Always.”

I rolled my lower lip beneath my tongue, then brushed my mouth against her ear.

“Stay sober tonight with me. Get through this without getting drunk.”

Bea scoffed. “You don’t know my parents like I do, Don. They have far too many ways of getting to me—they don’t even have to try. Staying sober when we’ve got an entire cellar of the most expensive wines known to man... why would I want to do that?”

“Because,” I purred, “if you can manage it, when dinner’s over, I’ll reward you handsomely for your efforts.”

“Interesting.” Bea’s own tongue flicked between her lips. “Reward me how, I wonder?”

“I was thinking I’d take you back up to our room, tear this expensive dress off your body...” I plucked at the strap of her elegant black evening gown she wore. The Argentos certainly never missed a chance to dress up. “Then bend you over the balcony and fuck your cunt until you’re screaming over the rose garden. Unless...you have other ideas?”

Bea swallowed, then nodded. “It’s an interesting offer.”

“I certainly thought so.”

“And I’ll certainly consider it.” Her eyes found mine again. I caught the faintest impression of a shiver passing through her shoulders. Perfection. “But no promises. You don’t know what they’re like. Not yet.”

That may have been true, yes.

But as we walked into the dining room, I suspected I was about to find out.

“ARE YOU NOT DRINKING TONIGHT, BEA?” As we reached the main course of the meal, Bea’s mother’s brows made an effort to furrow themselves. Unfortunately, the upper half of her face was as unmoving as always. “If you’re not feeling the wine, I can see about getting you a cocktail instead.”

“You know, I’m just not feeling like it tonight.” Bea stared at me intensely. I liked the look in her eyes. Thirsty, yes. But not for wine. Not anymore. “Maybe I’ll have a cocktail later. We’ll see how the evening goes.”

I liked the way that word played on her lips: *cocktail*. She was teasing me. Blatantly. And she knew it, too.

God, I loved my wife.

“And Simon, you poor thing,” Bea’s mother pouted. “You’ve barely touched your meal! Is it not to your taste?”

My eyes didn’t leave Bea. “Oh, it’s very much to my taste.”

Bea blushed. I watched her try to fight back a smile. When she found she couldn't, she turned her face away.

"Goodness." Bea's mother pressed her fingertips to her lips and laughed a little nervously. With her other hand, she fanned herself. "Marriage is certainly suiting you, isn't it?"

"Your daughter is a beautiful woman." Beautiful, and *mine*. "I can hardly complain."

"It's good to see the two of you getting along so well," said Bea's father. "Bodes well for the future. Our clients will certainly be pleased."

"And we're so excited to be grandparents, of course," Bea's mother added.

Bea's smile vanished in an instant as she snapped her gaze back up at her mother's words.

"Grandparents? What do you mean?"

"Well, we thought it might be a few years before you started thinking about it, but seeing the two of you together like this tonight..." Bea's mother raised her wine glass and beamed. "Maybe a baby or two will be coming along sooner than we thought, hmm?"

"Can't come soon enough, if you ask me." Bea's father grunted in agreement, then tipped back the rest of his wine.

"You expect Simon and I to...have a child together?" Bea looked as surprised by all of this as I was. "Simon and I never agreed to that."

"No, *you* never agreed to that." Bea's father gave me a sidelong glance. It said *how annoying. I warned you how difficult she can be*. "Not explicitly, anyway. But Leviathan is a family company, Beatrice, and a family has children. You and Simon will need an heir to carry on the Roth family name."

"Couldn't we just...adopt?" Bea said—quite sensibly, in my opinion.

"We're not the Jolie-Pitts, sweetie," Bea's mother cooed. Through her Botox, she almost managed to make her face look sympathetic. "Adoption...it's a little gauche, don't you think?"

Bea's mouth fell open in shock. I didn't blame her. My jaw was clenched tight as well.

Adoption? *Gauche*? What was wrong with these people? Who the hell did they think they were?

I may have been a demon, but the way the conversation had just shifted was thick with a greater kind of evil than anything I was capable of. The

scent of it coming up off Bea's parents' skin drowned out the smell of the meal. Now, instead of beef Wellington and wine, the room reeked of sulfur and rot.

"We need to secure our bloodline." Bea's father nodded to Bea's mother in agreement. "You know who we are. You know there's only one way to do that."

"Why is this the first I'm hearing of this?" I could tell how badly Bea wanted to fight them on this. Her fists were clenched into tight little balls and her brow was furrowed with anger. "Are you even listening to yourselves?"

Of course they weren't.

As soon as she decided to give her father exactly what he deserved—a swift punch in the throat, for starters—I'd be out of my chair to give him a kick in the ass as well.

But Bea stayed seated.

It was a shame. I was pissed off enough right now, I was practically salivating for a proper fistfight.

"Please don't argue, Bea." Bea's father nodded to a servant, who brought the wine bottle over and sloshed more red into his empty glass. "Simon and I discussed this before he proposed to you. It's already been decided, so there's no need to try and talk your way out of it."

"But—" Bea's chest heaved. Her face was twisted with confusion. Betrayal. Pleading for her parents to listen to her—just for a moment.

It broke my heart, but even more than that, it pissed me off.

These people weren't parents at all.

Bea's father cut her off with a stern look before she could say anything more.

"This is what has to be done. You're our only daughter. Our only child. The future of our family, Leviathan Financial, and everything we represent—all of the money we manage and the many, *many* people we employ who will be without jobs if you fail—it all rests on your shoulders now. So, it's what you'll do. Understand?"

"I...I understand." Bea's gaze dropped to her lap. Her voice was broken and impossibly small. "Whatever the family needs. Of course."

"Good," Bea's father said with a nod. He smiled as he turned his eyes to me again. "You were right, Simon. She wasn't hard to convince at all. More wine?"

I stared at Bea's father's wine glass for a long moment, imagining how good it would feel to smash it against the table and drive the stem right through his throat.

"Excuse me," I said curtly. My chair scraped against the hardwood floor as I pushed it back. I stood and tossed my napkin down. "Enjoy your meal. I'm afraid I've just lost my appetite."

Before anyone could argue with me, I strode out of the dining room.

I couldn't stand to share a table with Bea's parents for a moment longer.

They didn't deserve my presence—nor did they deserve hers.

"Simon?" Bea called out the name as she followed me out into the hall. "Simon!"

I didn't turn to it. I didn't react. Didn't respond.

Simon wasn't my name. Wearing his face felt like walking around in an ugly Halloween mask. Being him—pretending to be—was as unnatural to me in that moment as trying to breathe water or drink air.

I wasn't Simon fucking Roth.

I was Abaddon, King of Hell, Lord of the Abyss, and Bea was my bride. Mine and mine alone.

"Don," Bea hissed. She ran up to me and grabbed my elbow, jerking at it until I came to a stop. "What's the matter? What's wrong?"

"You know exactly what's wrong, Bea." Finally, I turned to her. Even looking upon her lovely face, twisted with worry, I couldn't deny the anger in my gaze. "You were in there. You heard them. They wanted Simon to get you pregnant, and he agreed. Without your permission. It's not fucking right. I can see it so clearly—why can't you?"

"It's not right," Bea agreed. "But this...it's my life, Don. It always has been. My parents signed me up for this the moment I was born."

"This isn't the thirteenth century anymore, Bea. You're not property. No matter how they've tried to convince you otherwise."

"I'm not a normal woman, Don. I'm an Argento." Bea dropped my elbow and held her arms out in exasperation. "My family is old and powerful and has more money than most people can even imagine. And there are prices for that kind of power."

"Then they've appraised you incorrectly." My lips curled into a sneer. "Whatever they thought they were getting out of this deal, you're worth more."

“This is just how things *are*, Don! If I was a Hilton or a Rothschild or a Vanderbilt—even a fucking Kardashian— maybe things would be different.”

“I don’t want a Kardashian. I want you.”

“This *is* me. Families like the Argentos—we don’t end up on Buzzfeed lists of wealthy families, and we don’t go on reality TV shows. We live in the shadows of our fortunes. In a completely different world that controls the one everyone else lives in. As different from the one everyone else exists in as Heaven is to Hell.” She shook her head. “And in this world, I don’t have a say about things like who’ll I’ll marry or have children with.”

“Why the fuck don’t you? You’re your own person with your own free will.”

“You heard my father. If I don’t do what’s necessary to keep Leviathan afloat, it’s not just thousands of people who will lose their jobs. It’s *hundreds* of thousands. Leviathan owns too much. It’s truly too big to fail. Can’t you see that?”

Her eyes pleaded with me for understanding. She had that from me in spades. I understood the pressure she was under. I understood what was at stake.

But her gaze was begging for mercy, too.

She wouldn’t find any of that. Not from me.

I took her shoulders in my hands. A gasp left her throat as I pushed her up against the wall.

“This isn’t you at all.” My fingers curled around her throat as I lowered my lips down toward hers. “The Bea I know is stubborn and headstrong. She’d never let anyone tell her what to do—or who to fuck, for that matter. If Leviathan really is too big to fail, then it should have never existed in the first place.”

God. I’d always known Bea’s last name had come with attachments and responsibilities. But now that the truth was out in the open, I finally realized exactly what I’d saved her from by taking Simon’s place on Bea’s wedding day.

They hadn’t just wanted Bea to marry the fucker. They’d expected children as well. It made my head pound, and my veins turn to fire and ice all at once.

How dare they? How could they have so little regard for their daughter and her desires and her life?

“I don’t know what you want from me, Don.” She was shaking. Scared, maybe. But in this moment, she had every right to be. “I’m only that person you think you know when I can afford to be. Here, with my family...I’m not her at all.”

“No?” I pushed her jaw upward, forcing her lips within a fraction of an inch of my own. “Maybe you’ve just forgotten. Maybe I’ll have to remind you again.”

I forced my lips against hers. I didn’t care if she kissed me back or not. I was too angry to give a damn.

As I did it, I shrugged my disguise as Simon off my body like an ill-fitting coat.

“Don,” Bea gasped as she opened her eyes to find my face staring back at her instead of Simon’s. “You’re *you*.”

“I’m always me, kitten.” I raked my fingers through her hair and took her breast in my hand, squeezing it slow and firm. Claiming it for my own. “Couldn’t stand to wear that bastard’s stupid face for a second longer.”

“That’s dangerous, Don. What if we’re caught?”

I glanced down the hall both ways. It was empty.

“Let them catch us, then.” I locked my eyes on hers. I knew good and well that my grays were simmering with barely contained flames. “If they want you bred so badly, they should know who’s doing it.”

“They want a child from Simon, though, Don.” Bea shook her head. “Not you.”

Bea didn’t need to remind me. In doing so, my anger only grew. Not at her. Never at her. But at her parents for daring to believe that they had any say in what she did with her body.

At Simon, for believing he had any right to agree on Bea’s behalf.

“Too fucking bad,” I growled, pinning her hips against the wall with my own. I could have torn her clothes off and take her right there. Filled her with my seed and marked her with my teeth. Maybe I should have. Maybe I still would. “You’re not his to breed.”

“No?” Bea’s voice lowered to a whisper. Her eyes held many things—some of them fearful, some of them almost pleading with desire. “Whose am I then, Don?”

Even through all my fury, she had such a way of bringing a smile to my lips.

A wicked one.

“You’re mine, Bea.” I kissed her again, hard and fast, then took her hand and pulled her toward the stairs. “You’re all fucking mine.”

BEA

Don hauled me to my bedroom like a conquered bride. A prize that he'd won through blood and flame. When my feet struggled to keep up with his strides, a growl of annoyance rumbled from his lips—then he turned, lifted me up into his arms, and carried me the rest of the way.

In the bedroom, he threw me down onto the mattress then trudged back to the door. It closed behind him with a loud, sharp bang. Don's shoulders were tense as he shrugged off his jacket and tore away his tie.

I could only stare as he paced in front of the bed, furiously unbuttoning his shirt and cuffs.

When he glanced over to me, his eyes were dark with intensity. Mine were wide with awe.

"Take off your clothes. All of them." He looked at me like the demon he was. Wicked, half-furious, full of sin. Like a bad man who was planning to do bad, bad things to me. "I want to see you strip for me, Bea. Do it. Now."

I clenched my thighs together as a delicious kind of pain panged between my legs. His voice was rough and angry and deep as the night outside.

It made me weak.

But when it came to him—my husband, my demon, my fucking devil of a man—being weak was something I felt well-entitled to.

He was strong enough for us both.

I rose up onto my knees. His commands felt impossible to obey. The zipper of my dress came undone with a whisper. My tits spilled out of my top as it fell away, leaving me in nothing more than a pair of lace panties and a pool of silk all around.

His belt clanged as he undid it. He walked toward me slowly, kicking off his shoes before he crawled up onto the foot of the bed. He moved like a panther in the darkness, prowling and on the hunt. Stalking his prey.

Me. I was the thing he hunted. I was the small, trembling creature he'd take between his teeth. My heart fluttered, quick and shuddering, as he curled his fingers around my panties.

"I said all of it, Bea." He tugged them down in a sharp, quick motion. When I failed to move my body to help things along fast enough, he simply tore them apart and tossed them aside. "There. Completely fucking bare for me." He glanced down at my heels, then smirked. "Those, you can keep on. I want to feel your stilettos bouncing against my ass while I fuck you raw."

I folded my knees against my chest as his body shifted on top of mine. That wasn't what he wanted either, though.

"Spread them," he commanded, shifting up onto his knees as he took mine between his hands. "Show me your cunt. I want to see how wet you are."

Slowly, I pulled my knees apart. My heels dug into the soft bedding beneath me. My breath rose and fell far too rapidly in my chest.

Don moved his fingers between the lips of my cunt. He swiped them upward quickly, gathering warm, sticky honey at his fingertips and catching my swollen clit. A burst of pleasure shot off within me as he raised his fingers to his lips and sucked them into his mouth, licking them clean.

"Fuck. You're sweet." He closed his eyes and let out a growling breath through his nose. When his eyes snapped open again, they focused on my body with a whole new intensity. "Touch yourself, now. I want to see how you make yourself come."

"You want me to..." I blushed, suddenly unable to say the words. I wasn't normally so shy, but this was a whole new Don I was dealing with. He scared me. Excited me, too.

“To use those lovely fingers of yours to rub your clit and plunge into your sweet, hot cunt.” He smirked, haughty and teasing. Like the king of Hell he really was. “I’m assuming you know how?”

“I do, but—”

“Do it, Bea. Do it, or I’ll take you over my knee and blister your ass pink—then, I’ll spread you open all over again and show you how to do it myself.”

My hands moved to my hips, sliding down to my inner thighs. I did as he said. I touched myself for him. My fingers moved through my dripping wet folds. With two of them, I pressed down on my clit and rolled it until I found exactly the right angle to make little sparkles shimmer before my eyes. With the other hand, I dipped lower, slipping my middle finger deep into my cunt until my hips spasmed abruptly. I pressed my finger up against my G-spot, rolling my hips along with the motions of my hands.

He unzipped his slacks, then shoved them down. His boxers went with them, making his cock spring up when the tip caught on their waistband.

He wasn’t staring at what I was doing to my cunt. He was staring into my eyes, refusing to break my gaze.

Still, it didn’t seem to matter what he was looking at.

For me, his cock was always rock hard.

“Yes, Bea. Good girl. Just like that.”

Don’s body loomed over mine as he shifted closer, stroking his cock in time to the motions of my hips. A whimper of frustration and panicked need left my lips as he dropped his hands to my wrists and pulled them away. He pinned them down at my sides then lowered his mouth to my cunt in their place.

“I’m going to ravish you now, kitten,” he purred darkly. “And while I do it—don’t you dare fucking come.”

“Don,” I gasped. That wasn’t fair. I wanted to come. *Needed* to come. But there was no reasoning with him.

Not when he was like this.

My hips bucked violently against as his fingers slipped into me, finding my G-spot in an instant. As they did, his lips descended on my clit. He sucked it into his mouth, pinning it in place with his teeth while he lashed against it with his tongue.

“Fuck.” I threw my head back onto the pillows and raised my eyes to the ceiling. For every sharp breath of air that left my lungs, I had to inhale

twice. I tried to think of anything I could to help me obey Don's orders—but the harder I tried, the more I realized how little space in my brain there was for anything other than him right now.

Tonight, Don was angry and arrogant. Full of himself—and try as I might, I was full of him too.

He painted every inch of my thoughts with his presence. Every memory of every fuck we'd shared before my memory had been taken streamed through my mind of its own accord. In the bathrooms of five-star restaurants, with the door locked and the waitstaff banging against the frame outside, begging us to get a room. In the alleyways behind cocktail bars, a rough brick wall at my back and my collarbone between Don's teeth. In the mud of the garden outside of Nevermore in the Abyss, riding him hard and relentlessly while the rain fell down in a torrent of gray—

My body remembered him. It always had. It always would. Every moment of our time together, my mind had lost until today—but now, as he fucked my cunt with his fingers and sucked my clit between his lips, I knew exactly why the sight of him had made me feel the way I'd felt on our wedding day.

Memories could be stolen away by angels and demons—but the body never forgot.

"Don," I begged as the tightness in my core coiled up like a spring about to pop and release at any moment. "Don, please—I need to come. I'm *going* to come."

Don's lips released my clit with a wet, gentle *pop*! "Are you, Bea?"

He pumped his fingers into me even harder. Even without his tongue on my clit, he managed to make the need deepen and sharpen to a new world of desperation.

"Yes." I hissed the word at him through my teeth. "Please. Let me. I'll do anything—"

"That's exactly my fucking frustration tonight, Bea. You've never been all that good at doing what you're told." His body moved over mine. His lips hovered mere inches away from my lips. "And remember. I know you better than anyone. So. What changed?"

My teeth ached as Don continued to pump his fingers into my cunt. I wanted his cock instead. I wanted his cum. I wanted to orgasm—to feel that blissful release that would finally let my body relax into that warmth it had only ever known when I was with him.

And Don, the bastard, wouldn't let me.

"This is different," I panted. "Ever since I lost you...everything is different now."

"You're right," Don purred over me. "It is. I never wanted an obedient wife, Bea. I only ever wanted you. But this—the way you let those fuckers downstairs treat you? The way they control your life? That wasn't the Bea I know. That wasn't you at all."

"I'm sorry." I would have said anything in that moment. Anything at all. I wanted to please Don, but despite his orders, it was almost as if *he* didn't want me to obey. "Whatever you want from me—"

"What I want is to break you of this bad fucking habit, kitten." His lips pulled back in a snarl. "Either that, or I'll just have to break you and breed you myself instead."

He pulled his fingers from my pussy and shifted. In an instant, his cock was at my entrance and his fingertips were pressing against my lips instead.

"Suck them clean while I fuck you, darling. I want you to know how good you taste," Don commanded. "And whatever you do—don't fucking come."

He pressed his fingers into my mouth and, all too eagerly, I wrapped my lips around them. My tongue smoothed over them and twisted between them as I tasted myself. Just like Don said—sweet. I'd never tasted sweeter.

As Don pressed his cock against my entrance, all of his sweetness was long gone.

"Look at me, Bea. I want to see the fucking panic rise up your eyes when you realize how good this is going to feel."

He took his fingers from my lips and tangled them in the hair at the back of my head.

"I want you," I pleaded with him. "I do, Don. Please—I want you so bad."

"Good to know." He steadied his cock in his fist, then forced it into me with a short, rough thrust. "But tonight, I don't fucking care what you want."

Immediately, I cried out. I felt the panic that he'd wanted immediately. My mind exploded with it as my cunt instinctively began to spasm around

him. When being fucked by Don felt this good, how the hell was I supposed to stop myself from coming?

I swallowed hard as I realized the answer.

I wouldn't be able to.

And whatever Don did to me when I finally couldn't help but disobey him...that thrilled me and terrified me all at once.

I spread my legs farther apart for him anyway, allowing him to thrust deeper. My body tensed and shuddered as he worked his cock in and out of me, plunging more of himself inside of me with every roll of his hips.

My cheeks were burning. Flames sparked and fizzled at my fingertips until finally, I had to press my nails into Don's shoulders just to keep myself from tumbling over the edge into ecstasy.

He bottomed out in a matter of thrusts, and my lips fell open in a gasp. Shamelessly, his lips fell onto mine, his tongue shoving itself against my own. He stroked me with it as he fucked me. Kissing him back only made the urgency of my impending orgasm even worse, but I couldn't help myself.

It felt too fucking good to hold back.

"Don—" My voice was high and sharp when he finally pulled back, breaking our kiss.

"Don't come, Bea. Don't you fucking dare."

"I'm going to. I have to, Don. You can't...you can't fuck me like this and expect—"

"I expect you to do what you're told, kitten. Isn't that how you like things now? Doing what you're told?"

"Fuck you." I clawed at his shoulders and dropped my hands to pound at Don's chest. "Fuck you, and fuck doing what I'm told."

Like the clouds parting after a rainstorm, above me, Don smiled.

"Prove it," he said. "Don't come."

He was all I could focus on. Don, and the pressure building inside me, dangerously close to setting itself free whether I wanted it to or not.

But I wanted to come. I didn't care what he said.

Either I would come because I let myself, or I would orgasm around Don's cock anyway because he didn't give me any other choice.

I pulled his lips down to mine, claiming his mouth for my own—and just like that, I let myself go. The threads of the tense, tight knot that had formed in my core snapped and sprang free in blinding ecstasy. With a

roar, Don joined me, sowing his seed deep within me until I felt fuller than I'd been in my entire life.

He collapsed on top of me, murmuring words of praise against my skin in between hot, tender kisses.

"Perfect thing. My Bea. My bride." His cheek was slick with sweat as he nuzzled against my breast. "That's the Bea I remember. That's my fucking wife."

"I was always your wife, Don." I stroked his hair and held him tight, still swimming in post-orgasmic bliss. I was tired. Spent. "I'm yours. Always. No matter who I have to be for everyone else."

"I understand, Bea. I don't fucking like it, but..." He shifted to the side and gathered me up in his arms. "I'm sorry for that. I didn't mean to be cruel to you."

"I married a demon, Don," I said with a laugh, then stole quick kiss from his lips. "I don't expect you to always be good."

As it turned out, I liked him bad. An awful lot, actually.

"I just needed to see you again. The real you. I wasn't ready for the person you have to be around them."

"Well, you saw me." We were both still hot and sweaty, but that didn't stop me from cuddling deeper into his embrace. "I warned you, you know. You can't pretend that I didn't."

"Should have let you drink that whole bottle of wine," Don grumbled. "Sorry I didn't."

"Don't be. I like seeing you too," I promised him. "Every part of you. Even the hellish bits."

"That's good, Bea." Don laughed, then gave me a squeeze. "There's a lot of Hell in me."

I giggled, squeezing my thighs together and wiggling slightly. Don's cum was dripping out of me. Inside me, there was an entire flood of it as well. "Thanks to you, handsome, I think there might be a lot of Hell in me now, too."

DON

As badly as I wanted to fall asleep next to Bea, I just couldn't bring myself to do it.

Falling asleep would have required me to close my eyes. On that night, I just couldn't bring myself to stop staring at her.

She slept soundly. The nightmares of her past didn't dare rear their ugly heads. Not while I was beside her. The moonlight shimmered in through the open window of the balcony, making Bea's sun-kissed shoulder glow where the edge of the sheet kissed her skin. The warmth of the day had faded into a cool breeze that played with the curtains and rippled across the bed.

Even my temper had abated. Not entirely, but at least by half.

Despite the lesson I'd been hell-bent on teaching her tonight, I knew that in many ways, Bea had been right about tonight.

Her parents hadn't been easy people to get along with after all. While they seemed to like me—or the version of Simon that I was pretending to be—the feeling certainly wasn't mutual.

Fuck them, though. If they wanted an heir, they'd get one. The pressure Bea felt to do what she needed in order to keep the company afloat was one that I could respect, even if I disagreed with how it was coming about.

But it was my seed between Bea's thighs right now, and it would be my child that stirred in her womb when the time was right. Not Simon's. Never Simon's.

No matter how Bea's parents tried to control her, they'd already been thwarted without even knowing it.

She'd never be his.

She would always be mine.

As I smoothed the dark, silken waves of her hair out on the pillow beneath her, I heard a rustling coming from out on the balcony. At first, I dismissed it as a trick of the wind, but when I heard it again, I saw a long, dark shadow stretch across the glow of the moonlight.

Quietly, I rose and pulled on a pair of black silk pajama pants.

Hopefully, it was just Mal, coming to give me an update on how Ava was doing. Even better, it might be Lock. Maybe he'd finally managed to locate Joan.

Unfortunately, that hope was abruptly dashed as I moved out onto the balcony.

"Hello, Abaddon." The voice was dark and deep. It buzzed in the throat of the man who spoke the words.

I knew it well.

"Beelzebub. It's been a while." I keep my face neutral as I turned to face him. I had no great love for Zeb, and I suspected the feeling had always been mutual. "The door is downstairs, you know. It's polite to knock."

He may have been one of my mother's comrades among the Fallen, but in Hell, comrades weren't always allies.

When Lucifer and Evie had abdicated the throne of Hell to Lock, Mal and me, I knew it must have infuriated him.

He wasn't the kind of man who enjoyed seeing others lay claim to what he wanted for himself.

"You know me, Don. I've always been more of a fly-on-the-wall kind of man." He raked his fingers through his dark hair as he stepped from the darkness, his lips curled into something close to a smile. "Didn't want to wake your new bride's household. Congratulations, by the way—never thought you were the marrying type."

"You thought wrong." I didn't want to betray too much to Zeb, but I was surprised that he'd already heard of my marriage to Bea. It wasn't exactly something we'd sent out gargoyles bearing wedding announcements about. "Who told you the good news?"

“There’s been a little buzz here and there.” Zeb shrugged and held up a hand. Immediately, a fly floated in on the wind and landed on his fingers. “Word travels in Hell, you know.”

“It must.” To his credit, Zeb was excellent at gathering information. A fly on the wall—that was probably exactly how he’d learned. “But if you just came here to congratulate me, I’m afraid you’ve broken protocol. Usually, a card would have sufficed.”

“Oh, no. You know how I am, Don. Hardly the sentimental type.” Zeb chuckled. “No, I just thought I’d come to ask you in person exactly what you plan on doing when the angels discover what you’ve done. As I recall, you weren’t supposed to be cavorting around with humans anymore—but perhaps I misunderstood the terms of that ceasefire?”

“Maybe the angels won’t find out at all.” I leaned up against the balcony’s railing. My posture was casual, but the look in my eyes was firm. “As long as meddling demons don’t go around running their mouths, at any rate.”

“Don’t worry, Don. I’m not planning on leaking your secrets up to Heaven. But on the wings of angels...word travels as fast above as it does below, you know.” Zeb clucked his tongue at me. “I have to wonder what on Earth was going through your mind to marry her in the first place.”

“I didn’t marry her to spite Heaven, if that’s what you’re asking. If the angels need an explanation, I’m happy to tell them that as well.”

“For love, then?” Zeb walked to the threshold between the balcony and the room and peered inside. “She *is* very beautiful. She must have been a difficult thing to lose.”

“And an even more difficult one to keep, considering the current circumstances.” It felt like Zeb was building to a question. I’d let him keep flying circles around it until he was ready to land.

I had a question for him myself.

“Angelic, isn’t she? Sweet enough to eat.” Zeb waved the fly toward her.

I caught it in my fist and crushed it there before it could make its way into the room.

“Sometimes,” I admitted. “But she’s got a temper hotter than Hell itself. As do I—so I’d recommend you stop leering at my wife.”

“As you wish.” Zeb gave her a last, lingering stare, then turned to me again. “Was that your motive, then? An angel in your bed. Maybe splitting

Hell with the others wasn't enough for you. Maybe you wanted a little slice of Heaven for yourself as well."

"My motive was keeping her alive." I wiped the dead fly on the shoulder of Zeb's suit jacket. "The man she was supposed to marry has struck a deal with a demon. The deadly kind. One has to wonder..."

"Oh, Don. Don't be so pedestrian." Zeb swatted my hand away. "I wouldn't risk upsetting the angels' precious balance by angling for the death of a human. You're not allowed to fuck them, the rest of us aren't allowed to fuck *with* them. I remember the rules—even if you seem to have forgotten."

"And I don't suppose you know who *would* have made such a deal?" I didn't take anything Zeb said at face value. He was an artful liar and a compelling one. Arguing with him on the point would get me nowhere. But at some point, if he was pushed sufficiently, he might let something slip by accident. I had to hope. "One of your lesser minions, perhaps. I can't imagine any of your people are thrilled about your failed ascension to the throne."

"Do you really think me so petty, Don?"

"Yes," I said. "Absolutely."

"I've been too busy to go making deals with humans. While you and Moloch and Malacoda have been absent trailing after your little human girlfriends, I've been running Adversary Industries with Mammon. It's hardly a job that allows me the free time to go meddling in your affairs—and I do mean *affairs* in both senses of the word."

"She's not just a lover," I said with a scowl. "She's my wife now. We made our vows before the Almighty Himself."

"While you wore the guise of the man she was supposed to marry," Zeb reminded me.

"I don't imagine the glamors of demons will fool His watchful eye."

"Maybe not. But like I said, if I'm your best lead on this little manhunt for demonic assassins you're half-assing, you're doing even worse than I feared. I've been making some exciting new acquisitions for the company here on Earth. It's taking up all my energy—you're lucky I even found the spare hour to meet you here tonight."

"And you don't think new business acquisitions counts as meddling in human affairs?"

“Well, you know how it is. When the devils are away, the Fallen will play. But I didn’t say they were human acquisitions.” Zeb’s smile was broad and spiked with something wicked. “Stop by my office sometime. I’d be more than happy to fill you in during business hours—but I didn’t come here to talk business tonight.”

“Maybe you should get to your point, then.” I’d already gotten what I needed to know from him. Like usual, he was gathering information. Everything he’d mentioned tonight told me he knew far too many things to have been relying only on his little flies.

Someone was feeding Zeb intel. Who that was—he’d never tell.

I’d have to look into that for myself.

“Just be careful, Abaddon. That’s all.” Zeb glanced back into the room where Bea still slept soundly. “She really is a lovely thing. It would be a shame if you lost her again.”

Zeb snapped his fingers and vanished into a swarm of flies. I watched as they flew off into the night, then I stepped back inside—careful to shut the balcony doors tight behind me.

I didn’t want any of Zeb’s little creatures wriggling their way back in.

His warning felt as sinister as Zeb himself was. I didn’t trust him—but he wasn’t wrong, either.

It *would* be a shame to lose her.

Which is exactly why I wouldn’t.

BEA

It had been a long time since I'd dreamed of the dark figure in the corner of my room. It had haunted my nightmares as a child. Even into adulthood, I'd woken up terrified of it from time to time. But over the last few years, those dreams had stopped. I'd almost forgotten about it entirely—at least, until Don had reminded me of it on that first morning we'd shared as husband and wife.

On that night, I'd dreamed of it again. Seething and watching from the corner next to the mirror. Every time I tried to look away, it only grew bigger—and when I watched it, it darkened, watching me right back.

I woke up feeling like I'd barely slept at all. Beside me, Don was still fast asleep. It was unlike him. Normally, he was awake long before I ever was.

I smiled and pressed a kiss to his neck. His skin was warm beneath my lips. The earthy, clean scent of him filled my nose as I breathed him in.

He must have really tired himself out last night.

Good.

He'd worn me out too.

I put the dream of the shadow out of my mind as I got up, showered and dressed.

It was just a dream, after all. I wasn't a child anymore. Nightmares didn't scare me like they had once upon a time.

Especially not now that I knew of the far more terrifying things that lurked through the shadows here in real life.

I wore a tight pencil skirt and a soft, sheer green blouse over an undershirt. Paired with a simple gold pendant, my wedding ring, and a pair of heels, I knew the ensemble would do me plenty of favors today.

When dealing with Leviathan Financial, it was always best to keep my assets clear in their minds. As far as the men my father worked with were concerned, a woman's best assets were entirely anchored in her looks. In my case, that meant my tits, my waist, my hips, my legs—and of course, my ass itself. I left my hair down, flowing in its natural waves. There was something that called to Veronica Lake in the way it fell over my shoulders, which was always a good thing.

The people we'd be speaking to today had never really left the 1940s in terms of social progress. If they wanted a silver screen starlet, that's what they'd get.

Don was still asleep when I finished getting dressed. I pressed another kiss to his temple before I left the room.

"I'm going to go make coffee, handsome," I whispered in his ear. "And if you're not awake to drink it with me by the time I get back, I'll just have to wake you up myself."

It was a thought that made me smile even bigger. Drinking coffee in bed with Don before we went into battle—so to speak—seemed like a normal thing that normal married people did. Our entire relationship so far had been marred with abnormality.

Angels. Demons. Reincarnation.

Lost memories.

Lost time.

We deserved a little normal, after all we'd been through. Coffee in bed sounded like just the thing.

I could have rung for one of my parents' servants to make the pour-over for me, but it felt nice to be domestic for a little while. When I'd first arrived at college, I hadn't even known how to boil water. I'd had to force Joan to show me.

Now, I could move around the kitchen, grinding coffee beans and setting up the filter with confidence and ease.

I was just about to start pouring cups when I felt another presence enter the room. I didn't hear the footsteps coming, which meant it wasn't

my father. He clomped around wherever he went.

When I turned, hoping for Don, I was immediately disappointed.

The man who'd just walked into the kitchen was tall with steel-colored hair and a matching goatee. He wore a crisp, dark suit with a black shirt and tie underneath.

He was smiling at me. He moved across the floor toward me without making a single sound.

"Oh. Hi, Levi." I fought back a shiver as I said his name. Simon's father had always given me weird vibes, but I could manage myself around him. Appeasing men like Levi was kind of my job. "You look...happy."

He looked creepy, more like.

"Why wouldn't I look happy?" Levi blinked at me with his cold blue eyes. His smile didn't waver. Not even for a second. "You're happy. My son is happy. Everything's going exactly according to plan."

"I'm assuming my dad didn't mention to you the, ah...*awkwardness* at dinner last night, then?" I wasn't sure why I even bothered bringing it up, except that maybe I hoped Levi could shed some light on what part he'd played in that agreement. If my dad had known, and Simon had known, it only made sense that Simon's father did as well.

Part of me genuinely wondered whose idea it had been. Simon's, my dad's, or his?

"The pregnancy discussion?" Levi shrugged. "He mentioned it. I don't see why it matters, though. You're married now. You'll do as you're told. Won't you?"

"I just didn't realize that me getting pregnant was part of the deal," I mumbled, embarrassed to even mention it. Getting angry or arguing with Levi would get me about as far as it had with my father—which was to say, not far at all. "I'm not sure I'm okay with how that was handled. It's not nice being caught off-guard or left in the dark on things like that."

Or not having a choice at all, I didn't bother to add.

I knew that like my father, Levi wouldn't care about what I did or didn't want.

"What does it matter? You look, ah...*well taken care of*, let's say." Levi pinched my cheek, then turned away to check his phone. "Maybe you're pregnant already."

"What—" I started a question even I didn't know the end of. There was something in his smile that filled my mind with worries. *What do you*

mean? Why would you say that? What do you know about me that I don't?

Luckily—or unluckily—I didn't have to come up with what to ask Levi first.

Before I could finish, I was cut off.

“Good morning, everyone!” Simon appeared in the entrance of the kitchen—only, I knew he wasn't Simon at all. Just Don in his disguise. “Beautiful day, isn't it?”

It was still a little shocking to see Don in his Simon costume, especially after last night. Don's glamor was excellent. He'd gotten every detail right, even down to the way that Simon frequently misbuttoned his shirt. I thought about fixing it but stopped myself.

We needed to be convincing today. Simon's crooked collar beneath his suit jacket and tie would help.

It was a good thing that today, there was no such thing as a disguise that was *too* good. The only person bothered by the uncanny resemblance would be, well—me.

Most shocking of all, though, was the swollen split in Don-as-Simon's lower lip. Like he'd rolled out of bed and right into a fist.

“D—I mean, Simon!” I was so startled, it was a lucky thing that I caught myself before blurting out Don's real name. “What happened? You're hurt!”

“And you're so sweet to notice, darling.” Don crossed the kitchen to me and patted my head. *Pat, pat*. Like I was some kind of treasured lapdog instead of his wife. Maybe his lip hurt too much for a kiss? “But it's nothing, I can assure you. I'm perfectly fine.”

“You didn't take a swing at my dad, did you?” I bit my lip as I reached out to touch his wound, but Don swatted my hand away. “You don't look fine. If you're late coming down because you two were fighting...”

“Why in the world would I do that?” He smiled slowly. Normally, Don's smiles filled me with light and warmth, but that one only put something cold and slick in the pit of my stomach that slithered around anxiously and wouldn't stay still. “I only slipped in the shower. Clumsy of me, really. Does it look bad?”

“No,” I said, my voice full of trepidation. “It looks, um. Dashing.”

“Ah. Good.” Don patted my cheek, grabbed a cup of coffee, and started dumping sugar in. Which was strange, though I could hardly comment on it. Simon took his coffee in the exact same way, and it was Simon that Don

was pretending to be right now. Don was the one who drank his black as sin. “You look lovely today, by the way. Sweet enough to take a bite out of. Maybe later, right? That’s what you like?”

“Simon...” Levi warned him, glancing up from his phone.

Don rolled his eyes, let out a huff, and turned away.

My mouth tasted tinny. I swallowed hard, but the taste wouldn’t pass.

I’d spent nearly every day for two whole weeks sparring with Don in the gardens of Nevermore—and in the Abyss, some of those days had been incredibly long ones.

Don was many things. Handsome, charming, clever—and agile, too. Clumsy, he was not. I hadn’t even seen him knock something over yet. Usually, I was the one who did that—and usually, he moved fast enough to catch it before it hit the floor.

Coupled with what Levi had just implied about the potential that I was already pregnant...

Something about this morning just didn’t feel right.

My stomach rolled uncomfortably. I tried to take a sip of coffee to settle it, but the dark roast tasted wrong somehow. Too bitter. Definitely not the thing I needed, as it turned out. I only ended up delicately spitting it back out into the mug while Don’s and Levi’s backs were looking away.

“Morning, everyone,” Dad grumbled as he emerged from the hall. He helped himself to the coffee and didn’t even give me so much as a look. Simon, though, got a chuckle out of him. “You look like hell, son! I hope my Beatrice didn’t go too hard on you after dinner last night.”

Don touched the split in his lip and shrugged. “I’m all right. Just a little bump in the road. It’s all taken care of now.”

I stared at him with confusion. *It’s all taken care of now*—what did that even mean? It didn’t feel like something Don would say. It didn’t make sense in regard to his excuse for his appearance, either.

In fact, if I was being scrutinizing—and Don had just left me with no other option—I’d say that it almost looked like the split in his lip didn’t look fresh at all. It looked scabbed over. Like an older wound that had already started to heal.

It could just be that Don’s natural demonic healing factor was showing through his glamor, I supposed. Calling attention to it would only blow Don’s cover even more.

I wanted to pull him aside and ask him about it privately, but in the moment, I couldn't even get him to meet my eyes.

"The limo's waiting outside. Are we all ready to go?" Levi asked, gesturing to the door.

I supposed we were. Everyone else seemed to think so, at least.

"Come along, Beatrice." Don took my arm and looped it around his own.

Don never called me Beatrice. It was always Bea or kitten or darling—never my full name. It felt wrong even hearing it. But it was accurate to how Simon would have spoken to me. I supposed since Simon's father was here, Don was laying it on extra thick.

And he was succeeding at it, too.

No one seemed to be any the wiser that Simon wasn't actually Simon.

Everything was going according to plan.

This was good, or it should have been. If we played our cards right, after this meeting we might actually be able to fix some things about Leviathan Financial. Or at least, get started on it.

But as I glanced over at him as we walked out the door, he didn't glance back to meet my gaze. Maybe he was nervous about this meeting too?

If everything was going so well...

Why did I still feel like something was wrong?

DON

I woke up hard. Sleeping next to Bea all these weeks, that had quickly become the norm.

I rolled over, reaching for her. Maybe, if we were quick about things, I could make her come for me here in bed, then finish myself off inside her while we showered together to save time.

My body ached to be close to her. Even if we couldn't fuck before we started the day, I would have settled for her luscious lips against mine while I held her in my arms.

But to my surprise, I only found an empty mattress next to me. The sheets were rumpled. Though they were still perfumed with Bea's sweet scent, roses and vanilla, they lacked her warmth.

She must have woken up before me. Maybe she didn't sleep so well here in her parents' home.

It was kind of her, though, to let me catch a little extra shuteye. Kindness, I'd learned long ago, was one of Bea's many excellent traits.

I found a damp towel hanging up in the bathroom and water on the floor of the shower, but no steam. She'd already washed and dressed, then. Quickly, I did the same, put on the glamor that would make me look like Simon Roth, then headed downstairs.

I wanted to be near her. Now, more than ever.

After dinner last night and the warning that Zeb had left me with once Bea was asleep, I didn't like the idea of her being alone in this house in the

least.

“Bea, darling?” I called into the kitchen just before entering it. The smell of fresh coffee lingered in the air, but I didn’t find my wife sitting at the table with a mug of it waiting for me.

Instead, I saw Bea’s mother. She greeted me with a toothy smile that almost reached her eyes.

“Simon! Oh, good, you’re finally awake. Would you like me to ring for someone to pour you some coffee?”

“I can get it myself,” I assured her. Seemed ridiculous, calling someone else to pour liquid into a mug. “How are you?”

Have you seen Bea? I wanted to ask, but I knew that wouldn’t be very polite of me.

And as much as I might have despised Bea’s parents, I still needed to be cordial to them. If not for their sake, then for hers.

“Oh, I’m fine, sweetie. How are you?”

“Fine,” I said, tipping coffee into a cup. “I’m fine. Have you—”

“I hope we didn’t upset you too much last night,” Bea’s mother cut me off. “The way you stormed off...I’m afraid we might have said the wrong thing.”

“It’s Bea you owe the apology to. Not me.” I took a sip from the cup. The liquid was just warm enough to still be palatable. Not so fresh after all, then. “It was jarring, to see how little regard you and your husband have for her wishes.”

“Was it? But you already knew about the baby thing, honey, didn’t you?” Bea’s mother’s eyes focused on my coffee cup. “Do you want some sugar with that? I can call someone to—”

“No,” I said. Simon must have drunk his coffee so sweet he couldn’t even taste it. Pity that all that sweetness hadn’t managed to change his attitude. He didn’t care about Bea either. He never had. “I’m cutting back.”

“Good for you.” Bea’s mother tried to smile at me again, but it looked more forced this time. After a moment, she sighed and gave up. “I know that sometimes our world seems like a strange one. I wasn’t born into this like you and Bea were, you know. I’m aware of how difficult it can be, having to do things for the greater good whether you want to or not.”

“Is that so?” I feigned curiosity, keeping my eyes peeled for any sight of Bea through the doorway or out the windows. She was my focus right now, but at least I knew she hadn’t gone far. Wherever she was. We had too

much to do today, and Bea would certainly want coffee before we started. When she got here, I'd be sure to warm her mug up. "How do you mean?"

"I was only a model when I met Beatrice's father. He offered me a lot of money if I agreed to marry him—and I didn't come from much. So, I said yes. I didn't love him, but it seemed like a smart thing to do." She shrugged. "I didn't expect to love him either, but eventually, we found something that worked for us. It's not perfect, but it's a kind of love. And that's always been enough."

"I don't know that I'd describe what I feel for Bea as just a *kind* of love." No. It was a roaring, passionate love. An all-consuming love. The kind of thing that simultaneously devoured my soul entirely and made it complete. Whole. More than whole.

"That's why I got so excited for you two last night. I could see it, you know. I never had that myself, but I know what it looks like." Bea's mother sighed and sipped at her coffee daintily. "I know I haven't been a perfect mother to Beatrice, but I've always wanted her to be happy."

"As long as she does what you and your husband say, right?"

"Oh, Simon. Don't be silly. You have to do what your father says too, and you know it. It's just the way things are." Bea's mother glanced down at her phone and managed to almost look surprised. "Speaking of—shouldn't you be leaving soon? I think everyone else has already headed to Leviathan." She pulled her lips into something that looked almost like a frown. Her brow, like always, didn't move. "You don't want to be late."

"You're right," I said, setting the cup aside immediately. I did my best to make it look like I'd just remembered I was in a hurry. Hopefully, it would conceal the way my heart had just skidded to a complete stop. "I should have left with Bea."

Externally, I'd managed to keep my cool.

Internally, my body was churning with dread.

Something was wrong. Bea wouldn't have left without me. And if everyone else had already gone...

Fuck.

Either they'd taken her by force—or she thought that I was with her now.

With her, and looking exactly like Simon Roth.

I opened the portal to the Abyss out in the garden, away from the house. As soon as I was through it, I dropped my glamor and let my wings

spread wide.

They carried me all the way to the Pit. When I reached into it, searching for Simon's ever-falling body, my fingers only clutched at empty air no matter how deep I sought him out.

Fuck.

I pounded my fist against the ground—but I didn't even have time to fully indulge myself in my rage.

Bea was on the way to Leviathan. She was probably already there.

And she had no idea that she was walking right into what had to be a trap.

As for Simon...

He was gone.

And I suspected I knew exactly where to find him, too...

Right at Bea's side.

BEA

As soon as the door of the limo closed behind me, the feeling of wrongness intensified. Rapidly. An immense sensation of danger overtook me, and suddenly, the only thing that mattered was putting as much distance between me and these three men as possible.

Fuck.

I didn't want to blow Don's cover. Not with so much at stake. But my brain was screaming at me, *get out of this vehicle. Right. Fucking. Now.* And there was only so much ignoring of my animal instincts I could allow.

Don wasn't acting right. Or, rather, he was acting far *too* right. Before, I'd always been able to tell the difference between him and Simon regardless of appearances. But now, the line between them wasn't just blurred. It had been completely eviscerated.

Don's act was simply too good to be real.

And too real to be Don, too.

My heart pounded in my chest as I reached for the door. I didn't know what was going on, but this feeling of wrongness wasn't going away.

I needed to get back to the house. Now. And fast, too.

Once I was out of the limo, first I'd walk away—then, I'd run.

"Something wrong, Bea?" Not-Don asked, nodding at the way my fingers curled around the door handle.

"Sorry," I said with a big, shimmering smile. "I just remembered—forgot to pack tampons. That time of the month, you know? Let me just

run upstairs and grab a few, then—”

I jerked at the door handle, but it was locked. There was no button to unlock the door, either. No tab to pull, either.

I was trapped.

Not-Don reached over and uncurled my fingers from the handle. Across the limo, Levi chuckled and shook his head.

“That’s a clever lie, Beatrice,” Levi said. As the limo pulled out of the driveway, he sounded positively amused. “But it *is* a lie, isn’t it?”

I glanced to Don. Definitely *Not-Don*. He and Levi wore matching smiles.

“It’s cute that you thought you’d escaped me,” he said in Simon’s voice. With Simon’s mouth and Simon’s pale blue eyes that hadn’t shifted reassuringly into Don’s grays even once this morning. His lips dipped toward my ear, but the only shivers I felt were ones of complete and abject fear. “But I’m a Roth, Beatrice. And Roth men always get what they want in the end.”

I pulled away from him, desperately trying to swallow down the sickening feeling in the pit of my stomach. But my mouth was just too dry, and the sense of danger was all too real to push back.

No. The man sitting next to me wasn’t Don at all.

I didn’t know how he’d managed to escape whatever prison Don had been keeping him in, but this was Simon.

My fiancé. The real one.

The man who’d put a price on my life.

The man who wanted me dead.

I looked to my father, though I wasn’t sure why. Maybe I’d hoped that he would finally come to his senses and be the dad I’d always needed him to be. Fathers ought to protect their daughters from people like Levi and Simon. Not sell them away to evil, grinning men.

But my father looked zoned out entirely. His eyes stared dead ahead like he’d been hypnotized. They were empty and vacant, like his mind was somewhere else entirely.

Per usual, he would be no help in this at all.

It looked like I was all on my own.

Luckily, Don—the real one, wherever he was—had been sure to leave me with a few tricks up my sleeve.

Or, more accurately, burning bright in the palm of my hand.

Twisting my lips in anger, I shoved my hand against Simon's face and conjured hellfire right against his skin. He yelped as his cheek began to blister and burn beneath my touch as I pushed him away.

With my other hand, I summoned a second ball of flame. This one, I aimed at the window.

Once I'd blown it to bits, I'd shimmy out of it, tuck and roll, then run like hell.

Before I could unleash the explosion, Simon lunged for me. At first, I thought he was trying to grab my hand—but then, I felt a cold length of metal encircle my wrist. He fastened it closed too quickly for me to stop him. Immediately, the flames in my palm fizzled out.

I glanced down to get a better look at what Simon had just ensnared me with. It was a gold bracelet hung with medallions bearing strange symbols and miniature dragons. Just having it against my skin made my entire body feel cold and weak.

"What did you just do to me?" I snapped at him, shoving my back against the door in an attempt to put as much space between Simon and me as I could. I clawed at the bracelet to try to pull it off, but I couldn't find the clasp to release it anymore. It was like the entire bracelet was made of a single piece of metal now, far too tight to slip off over my hand.

"What? You don't like my wedding present?" Simon sneered. He clutched at his burned cheek, where boils were already beginning to form on his scarred skin.

"No," I spat back at him. Why couldn't I get this damn thing off? And why couldn't I use the powers that Don had given me anymore now that it was fastened around my wrist? "Not in the least."

"It's a charm bracelet, dear," Levi explained, watching me struggle. "Enchanted by yours truly to negate your magic. You're not going to be able to remove it. Only Simon can do that."

"Why?" I looked to Simon. My eyes were pleading. "We grew up together, Simon. We played together as children. I was even fully prepared to marry you, for fuck's sake! I thought we were *friends*."

"And yet, you married *him* instead, didn't you?" Simon's lips were curled into a snarl. There was nothing but hate for me in his eyes. "How long did it take you to even notice that he wasn't me?"

"You hired demons to *kill me*, asshole! On our wedding day!" I was pretty sure that fact negated anything else he had against me.

“Oh, Beatrice. Don’t be melodramatic.” Levi huffed and rolled his eyes with annoyance. “You were never in any *real* danger. That was all part of a ruse. If Simon hadn’t allowed Don to overhear him making his so-called deal with a demon, we wouldn’t have been able to set any of this into motion. He loves you, silly girl. Why would he want you dead?”

I blinked and drew my knees up to my chest, stunned.

Ruse. The word slipped between my ribs like a knife.

All this time, Don and I had been convinced that we were doing what was necessary to save my life.

But if Levi was telling the truth...

I’d never been in any real danger at all.

We’d played right into Levi’s hands.

“Why?” I asked Simon again. Tears of uncertainty were forming in my eyes. I bit my tongue and swallowed them back. “I was prepared to marry you, Simon. I agreed to everything. Every last detail. Why put me through all of this?”

“Because, you stupid bitch,” Simon spat back at me. Beneath the hand he kept folded over his cheek, his skin looked like it stung. *Good.* He deserved so much worse than just pain. “I loved you. I always have. It didn’t matter if we were married or not—you were never going to be truly mine.”

A terrible smile curled on his lips as he removed his hand from his cheek and placed it on my knee instead. I recoiled from his touch, but there was nowhere to retreat to.

“And now, you will be. Forever. That little bracelet I’ve put on your pretty wrist is just the start.”

“Don wanted to kill you,” I hissed. “He would have, too—but I begged him not to. I pleaded for your life.”

Levi chuckled. “Yes, Beatrice. That was very kind of you.” His laughter died on his lips, but his smile lingered. “But where I come from, kindness doesn’t get you very far.”

“And where’s that?” I asked. Part of me felt like I already knew what the answer must be.

Levi Roth was certainly not your average banker. That much was clear to me now.

“The flames of Hell itself, of course.” He winked at me. “But save your questions. We’ve still got a very important business meeting to

attend, you know—and there are a few more people I want you to meet first.”

THE REST of the limo ride was quiet and uncomfortable. I struggled to pick who to focus my glare at—Simon, his father, or mine. When we left the limo, my father didn’t even get out with us.

“What did you do to him?” I asked Levi.

I glanced both ways, hoping to make a break for it, but Simon kept my elbow clutched firmly in his hand. I couldn’t manage to break away.

“He’s fine. Just under a little spell.” Levi buttoned his suit jacket and led the way into the Leviathan building. “He’ll stir from it in a few hours with only a memory of the excellent business deal he helped strike today. I don’t really need him anymore, you see—not now that I have you.”

Up in Simon’s office at Leviathan, there were two men waiting for us. One was tall and dark-haired with black eyes. When he shook my hand, a buzzing sound filled my ears.

“Beelzebub, at your service.” He gave me a slick, slippery smile. “They call me Lord of the Flies—but it’s a bit of a mouthful. You can call me Zeb, if you like.”

I wiped my hand on my skirt when he let go of it. The way he looked at me made me feel more like calling the cops—but Simon had relieved me of my purse, and I didn’t expect the police force to be capable of dealing with this situation.

These weren’t normal criminals. They all wore designer suits and silk ties and expensive cologne that smelled like Hell itself.

“*Ciao, bella,*” the second man said as he stooped to kiss my hand. He didn’t have to stoop far. He had tan skin and a hunched back. His kisses against my knuckles were sloppy and far too eager. They trailed all the way up to the bracelet Simon had put around my wrist. “I am Mammon. Beelzebub and I—we are members of the Fallen. You know what that means, yes?”

I jerked my hand away from him before he started sucking on my fingers. He looked like the type.

“You’re demons. I’m aware.” I glanced to Levi. “Why are they here?”

“For a merger, of course. Possibly the greatest business deal ever cut here on Earth.” Levi moved to his desk and leaned against it. “Today,

Leviathan Financial and Adversary Industries become one. We've already signed our parts."

Mammon opened a black portfolio and showed me the documents. They were written in a script I didn't recognize. At the bottom, all of our names were listed, including my father's. Over every one of them but mine, a red mark stained the paper.

It looked like blood.

My suspicion was confirmed when Simon grabbed my hand and pricked my finger with a pin. A tiny drop of blood welled up on my skin. I struggled to stop him, but it was no use. He was simply too strong.

A wisp of smoke curled up from beneath my fingertip when Simon pressed it to the paper, just above my name. The portfolio glowed dark for a moment—then Mammon snapped it shut.

"Excellent!" Levi clapped his hands and looked at me with approval. "There. It's nice when thousands of years of hard work finally come together. Thank you so much, Beatrice. You've made us all so happy today."

"I don't even know who *you* are," I growled back at him. I glanced to the door, hoping once again to break away and run—but Simon twisted my arms behind my back and held them tight.

"You need to pay better attention, Beatrice." Simon hissed in my ear. "Didn't you hear what they said? That's Mammon, and that's Beelzebub, and they're—"

"I know who *they* are." I stared Levi down with an icy glare. "I don't know who *you* are. You're certainly not Levi Roth."

"Didn't Don tell you?" Levi arched a thick, steely eyebrow. "I'm Leviathan, of course. I rebelled against Heaven with all the rest. When they fell, so did I."

"There are only six Fallen." I knew this. Don's mother Belial. Mammon. Beelzebub. Moloch, who was still trying to track down Joan. Mulciber, who Don had told me was the most benign of the bunch. And Lucifer himself.

"There were seven, once." Levi shrugged. "But when Lucifer tamed Hell, he placed himself over the rest of the Fallen. Don's mother might have been happy with fucking demons and birthing more for Lucifer to command, but I didn't want to play second fiddle to the Devil. Mammon and Beelzebub here agreed. They stayed to work things over from the

inside while I left to make my own way on Earth. And I succeeded, Beatrice.” His blue eyes glinted with cold confidence. “In the end, I always do.”

“Succeeded at *what*, exactly?” Learn your enemy. Keep them talking. These were things that Joan had taught me, advice she’d picked up at all her self-defense classes. I’d never thought I’d have to actually use them, but now, I was glad that I’d listened to her advice.

“Tricking Heaven and Hell, first of all,” Levi revealed. “A few false prophecies distributed to the right people. A little maneuvering to make sure the angels and demons were too busy fighting each other to notice what I was doing on Earth.”

“Which was?” My mind was reeling. Everything Don had told me about the conflicts between Heaven and Hell suddenly made much more sense—only because the whole time, they’d been lies.

They’d been played. All of them. Angels and demons alike.

“Amassing power here on Earth, of course,” said Levi. “Leviathan Financial was born out of my efforts. I’ve always partnered with a man from your family—I needed a human, you know, to help ingratiate myself with the rest of the flock. Throughout the ages, the Argentos have been kind enough to anchor me to this realm through our business partnerships. I made your family rich, and in return, they made me a *very* special creature indeed.”

“You’re not special,” I spat at him. “You’re no different from any other human man. Amassing power because you want it—that’s what any man in your shoes would have done. What was your *goal*?”

Maybe if I could get that out of him, I could figure out a way to get him to let me go. Levi had an impressive bag of tricks. It would serve him right, if I could think of a way to trick him right back.

Pulling one over on an ancient evil entity seemed like a pretty big ask—but I had a Master’s degree in International Business and Economics. I had all of my mother’s good looks and charm, and all of my father’s willingness to crush anything that got between me and what I wanted.

I’d been dealing with men exactly like Levi for my entire life.

I’d been born for this.

And if I couldn’t work my way out of this mess—if I failed—I supposed I’d die for this, too.

"I never wanted all that much, really," Levi admitted, turning his nails over and admiring them. "Simply the chance to bring the world to an end."

"What the *fuck*?" I breathed the question, sharp and thin. It was like he'd taken all the air from my lungs. "Why?"

"Because I know the real contents of the prophecy, of course. Once Heaven and Hell have fallen and the Earth is in ruins...well..." He snorted, like he was about to tell me the punchline of a very funny joke. "That's when the fun begins."

I blinked.

I didn't know what else to say.

I didn't know what to do.

I looked to Mammon and Beelzebub, hoping beyond hope that one of them would share my revulsion to this idea. Beelzebub looked bored. He was playing with a fly while he sat in armchair off to the side, catching it in his fist and releasing it, only to catch it once more—and repeat.

When he caught me looking at him, he only winked.

"Don't look so surprised, sweetheart," he said. "The world's been trying to end itself ever since it began. We're just looking to help it along a little bit."

Mammon was at least polite enough to look attentive during Levi's ranting. When he caught my gaze, he smiled.

"And you're a part of it, *bella*!" He said it like it was a good thing. I couldn't even come close to agreeing. "Go on, Leviathan. Tell her." His grin widened. "She deserves to know the role she'll play in the days to come."

Levi only looked smug. He needed no prompting to continue his evil villain monologue. From the looks of things, he'd been waiting to tell it to someone for a very long time.

"You know, it sounded so simple, in the beginning. All I had to do was find the four human women who were destined to fall in love with demons. To live and die and live again, never to ascend to Heaven, never to fall into Hell. Caught up in the cycle of destiny and love. That was easy. All I had to do was follow the strands of fate." Levi held up his hands and laughed. "But don't get me wrong. It's been quite difficult trying to catch all four of you reincarnated at the same time—you, especially. The others show up so much more frequently than you do. I wish I knew why. Only

twice in the entire course of human history. You're a rare thing indeed, you know."

"And what do you want with us?" I was glad that it was me here instead of Joan or Ava or even Evie. I couldn't remember her properly, but I knew she'd been a good friend. At least they would be safe from Levi's wicked plans. But I didn't like the idea of being singled out by him, either. "If I'm so rare, why focus your efforts on me at all?"

Was it because I was the most easily manipulated? The most naive?

That thought rankled me.

Don was right. I should have fought harder against my parents' wishes. The future of Leviathan Financial be damned.

From the sounds of things, it had been from the start.

"I knew I could never hope to get hold of Lucifer's bride. She has the protection of the Almighty on her. Some things—not many, but some—are beyond even my abilities to claim. You, though..." Levi smiled. "Any of the others would have done just as well, but you were dropped right into my domain this reincarnation. Just like you were last time. And this time around, everything I need so I can set my plans into action has fallen perfectly into place."

"You're a monster," I hissed at him, struggling against Simon's grip. Before today, I'd always assumed Simon's muscles were for looks, not strength. But as he twisted my arms behind my back even tighter, I realized that now, he had both.

"Yes," Levi said with a chuckle. "I suppose I am."

Slowly, he crossed toward me.

The way he moved, he looked like a predator.

Trapped as I was, it made me feel like prey.

"It was kind of you and Abaddon, really, to play your parts so well." Levi raised his hand to my cheek. Before my eyes, his nails grew long and sharp. Like claws. Like *talons*. I winced as he dragged the tip of one from my temple all the way down to my lips. "And now that you've wandered right into my clutches... Believe me, Beatrice. I'm not about to let you go."

He leaned in close to whisper in my ear.

"Especially not now that you're pregnant with Abaddon's child."

DON

I flew like hell to get to the place where the veil was thin enough for me to open a portal through it.

I let Mal and Lock know of the situation on my way.

There was no telling exactly what Leviathan was planning, but if Bea was in danger, Joan and Ava were as well. As much as I would have appreciated Mal's and Lock's assistance in the rescue efforts, I knew that they needed to watch out for their own women.

The way I wished I would have done a better job of looking out for mine.

I swore as I flew down toward my exit. I'd known that Leviathan couldn't be trusted—and now, I was paying for it.

I didn't like paying for things that I didn't fucking want.

When I reached the thin place in the veil, I tore it open and dove through it without hesitation.

Right into Leviathan's office—

And right into a trap.

My breath left my lungs in a sharp, pained huff. My ribcage was unnaturally warm. I felt something wet trickle down my abs beneath my shirt.

When I looked down, I saw a long piece of shining metal piercing through my skin. *Blessed iron*. I followed it all the way to the fist that held it. On one of its fingers was a gold ring shaped like a dragon.

Of course.

“How kind of you to join the meeting, Abaddon.” Leviathan’s icy blue eyes met mine. The pain finally erupted through my body as he shoved the blade a little deeper. “Unfortunately, you’ve come unprepared.”

I gasped for air but found that my lungs wouldn’t hold any. It was a bad sign.

Most demons couldn’t even hold blessed iron without burning. But Leviathan had obviously been gone from Hell for long enough that he wasn’t a demon at all anymore. I searched for wisps of smoke coming off his hand but found none.

No. He was something else entirely now.

Worse, he’d known exactly where I would arrive in his office. That meant he could sense the veil as well. He might have even been capable of forcing his way through it into the Abyss.

When I caught sight of Simon across the room, holding Bea captive in his arms, it hurt far worse than any wound ever could.

Leviathan *must* have been able to open the Abyss. There was no other way that Simon could have broken free.

He gave the sword one final shove, burying it into my ribs up to its hilt. My legs felt weak. The only thing holding me up was Leviathan’s grip on the sword.

Which he must have known. I could see it in his smile.

Already, he thought that I’d lost. That he’d won.

When he let the sword go, I dropped to my knees, clutching at my wound around the edges of the blade. I looked back up to Bea and found her beautiful face contorted by a cocktail of emotions, each more heartbreaking than the last.

Rage. Agony. Fear. And somewhere in the midst of all of them...love.

“Get off of me,” she snarled at Simon with tears in her eyes. She struggled viciously against Simon’s grasp, but no matter how hard she tried to break free, it was no use. “I’ll fucking kill you. I’ll do it myself.”

“Then why the fuck would I let you go?” Simon whined incredulously. “For a businesswoman, Beatrice, you really don’t understand the art of the deal.”

“Let her go,” I rasped. I wanted to sink my teeth into Simon’s throat just for touching her. I wanted to tear his neck apart beneath my incisors and spit out a mouthful of his filthy blood. “Now. If you do, yes. She’ll kill

you, but she'll make it quick. If you don't, then *I'll* kill you—and I'll make hurt."

"And how exactly do you plan to do that?" Levi laughed humorlessly. "You're wounded, Abaddon. Badly, I think. Face it—I've outmaneuvered you, and now, there's nothing you can do to stop me. By the time you've finally gotten up the nerve to pull that sword out of yourself so you can heal enough to move, we'll all be gone. We'll take Bea with us—somewhere that won't be so easy for you to find. Luckily, my hiding places are much better than yours—thanks to a little help from my new friends, of course."

He gestured over to the two other people in the room. Zeb and Mammon. Of course, they were in on this too.

"Traitors," I snarled at them.

It was true. They were.

Zeb shrugged in response.

"Yes, Don. Demons are traitors. Big surprise." His voice dripped with sarcasm. "Whoever would've called that one? *Certainly* not *me*."

He scoffed and rolled his eyes, unmoved and unamused.

"I am your *king*, you petty bastards," I growled. My hand pressed against the floor as I tried to summon the energy to push myself up, but there wasn't any to be had. Trying only made the pain even more intense.

"I've never had much love for kings," Mammon said conversationally. He spoke like we were having this conversation on the Italian Riviera over a bowl of green olives and a bottle of red wine. "Besides, *bambino*, a king on his knees is no king at all."

Fury tore through me, just as sharp as any blade. As searing as any wound. I'd crack open their bodies and decapitate them both with their own ribs. I'd drag them to the shores of Lake Cocytus, in the deepest part of Hell where traitors were punished. I'd force-feed them sand from the beach until their bodies could take no more.

I would do it gladly. I would enjoy every moment of their agony.

Not because they'd betrayed me, their king.

But because with their help, they'd put my wife in harm's way once more.

I would have done it then and there. In an instant.

But Leviathan was right.

I couldn't even summon the energy to draw the blade of blessed iron back out of my chest.

"Don't be so hard on them, Abaddon," Leviathan implored as he crossed over to where his son was holding Bea hostage. "You and Moloch and Malacoda—you were in over your heads from the start. When you ascended to the throne of Hell, you inherited problems Lucifer himself didn't even know he had. Power is the currency of our world. Can you truly blame anyone for siding with the richest man?"

"Hear that, Beatrice?" Simon purred in Bea's ear. "Not such a bad deal now, being my wife, is it?"

"I'm not your wife," Bea snapped back at him. Her eyes met mine, pleading wordlessly. *Get up. Please. Please don't leave me. Please don't die.* "I'm his."

"And soon, you'll be his widow," Leviathan quipped. "How sad."

"I should have killed you on sight when I saw you at the wedding," I spat. "I was a fool not to."

"Yes," Leviathan agreed. "But you shouldn't be so hard on yourself, either. I've been working toward this moment for a very long time, you see. My plan was already in motion before you were even a twinkle in your mother's eye."

He reached into his pocket and pulled something out. It was as small as a key in the palm of his hand at first, but as he held it before me, it lengthened rapidly into a full, sharpened spear.

It was a weapon I knew the look of well.

The last time I'd seen it, it had nearly killed Lucifer.

As Leviathan handed it to Simon, I knew it would kill me now in his place.

"Do you know what I just gave my son, Abaddon?" Leviathan asked.

"The spear of the archangel Michael." Blood was filling my mouth now. I spat it on Leviathan's expensive-looking office rug. "I know it. I'm just wondering where you got it from. In league with angels now too, are you?"

Leviathan laughed. "I had one of my agents pick it up for me from the battlefield when the angels tried to conquer Hell. I like collecting powerful artifacts. You never know when they'll come in handy." He nodded to Simon. "He's wounded. He can't hurt you. Pierce him through his heart

with the point of the spear and let's be done with this." He checked his watch. "I do have other things to do today."

As Simon approached me, Michael's spear in hand, I could at least breath a ragged sigh of relief over one blessing.

Now that he had his hands full with killing me, at least he was no longer touching my wife.

I looked past him, up to Bea.

I'm sorry, my gaze said. I've failed you. You deserved better. I hope you find it.

Tears streamed down her cheeks in return.

Her eyes were a prayer. *I love you*, they said back to me. *Please tell me you've got some final trick up your sleeve.*

I feared she'd be sorely disappointed.

The only thing left to do now was buy time and hope for a gift from above.

"You don't want to do that," I growled up at Simon. It was an idle threat. With the blessed iron still in my chest, I was in no position to stop him.

But Michael's spear was shaking in his hands, and his face was pale with fear already.

Behind him, I saw Mammon shake his head faithlessly. Zeb rolled his eyes. They saw the same thing I did.

He might have actually been stupid and afraid enough for idle threats to hit home.

"I don't?" Simon's voice was shaky as well. Pathetic. He had me right where he wanted me. All he had to do was deliver the final blow. In a room full of fallen angels and demons birthed from Hell, he was made of nothing more than tissue paper. A used Kleenex of a man. Nothing more. "And why wouldn't I?"

"Because..." Bea said. Her voice came from the window on the far side of the room. It was open—and to my horror, she'd positioned her body halfway out of it. "If you kill him, I'll jump. We're fifty stories up. I think I might actually die before I even hit the ground."

The sight of her there, with the sky at her back and her hair wafting in the breeze, was so much worse than any wound I could have sustained here today. Her words shot through me like bullets from a firing squad.

Bea, falling to her death. Bea's lifeless body on the pavement below. Bea's eyes, closed like she was sleeping, or worse, Bea's lovely brown irises, staring up toward heaven, robbed of their light.

"Bea," I panted, reaching for her. She couldn't do this. I couldn't let her. The only solace I would have in death was knowing that she'd live on. If she took that from me—no. I couldn't bear it. "Please. Please, don't."

"Listen to your husband, Beatrice." Levi took a careful step toward her. She stared Leviathan down with a look of pure steel. "Come any closer and I'll do it now. You wouldn't like that, would you?"

"*Bella*," Mammon warned. He might not have had faith in Simon's grit, but he certainly looked like he believed in Bea's.

At Mammon's side, Zeb looked intrigued. Like my wife had just done the first truly surprising thing he'd seen in a long while.

"You wouldn't dare," Leviathan breathed. But I noticed the look he gave to Simon, too. One of warning. *Be prepared to stand down.*

"Wouldn't I?" Bea held her head high. The tears were still on her cheeks, but there was no fear in her eyes. "If I die, eventually, I'll reincarnate. I'll live again. That's the rule, right? And you said so yourself—I don't reincarnate often. It could be thousands of years before it happens, and who knows where all the other cogs in your plan will be then."

"If Simon kills him now, you won't be reborn at all." Leviathan held up his hands—almost a gesture of surrender. "You'll be out of this world for good. Is that what you want?"

"Maybe I do." She smiled at him. Far too pretty of a smile, by my reckoning—though, I could hardly complain. "Maybe I'll go straight to Hell and make problems for you there. You don't want to test me on this, Levi. You have no idea what I'm capable of when I set my mind to something—but if you kill him, you'll quickly find out."

Leviathan was sweating. It was an uncanny look for him—normally, his blood ran as icy and cold as his eyes.

"You're bluffing."

"Am I?" She certainly didn't look it.

"Mm. No," Mammon mused, stroking his chin. His gaze was rapt with interest—like a man watching a car crash. "I do not think she is."

"I wouldn't try her," Zeb admitted. "That look in her eyes..."

As I stared up at her, I had to hide the admiration in my own eyes. Now that she'd explained herself to Levi, I could tell that she wasn't in any true danger. She'd seen straight through his plan—and she'd found a way to leave him with his hands tied.

God, I loved her.

I loved the way her brain worked. I loved her spirit and her passion and her perfect heart and her eternal fucking soul.

I loved her more than life itself.

And now, it was time for me to rise up to her level.

She was the most exquisite thing that had ever walked the Earth—and I was her husband.

I was ready to prove exactly why I deserved to bear that title now. Her courage gave me strength.

While the others were distracted, with an aching slowness, I began to draw the blade from my ribs.

The pain was excruciating. Nauseating and dizzying. But it was far from the greatest pain I'd ever felt.

The worst pain of all was behind me now. It was buried deep in my heart and set in the very marrow of my bones.

Losing Bea—that was what true pain felt like.

The burn of the blessed iron beneath my hands and sear of the blade as it cut me again upon exit was nothing by comparison.

A paper cut. A cat scratch.

Simon, on the other hand...

"And what about me, Beatrice?" he snapped at her. "Don't you care how this hurts me? Would you really rather kill yourself over some fucking demon instead of being mine?"

She stared at him for a long moment, then laughed.

"You know, Simon? Honestly?" She nodded. "Yes. Yes, I most definitely would."

Poor, stupid Simon. He was only a half-demon. I knew the iron wouldn't hurt his body nearly as much as it had injured mine.

But the way he shrieked, high and ragged, as I rose up and drove the sword through his back told me that he'd never felt true pain at all.

Not until that moment, at least.

Now, he'd die with the smallest taste of how terrible losing Bea truly felt. His pain, a mere fraction of my own.

At the sound of his whimpering, the gazes of the others snapped back onto us. Simon's body slumped forward. His whimper turned into pathetic screaming as I pulled the blade back out of him. I let it fall from my blistered hand and dropped it to the floor with a clang.

"She was never yours," I rasped in Simon's ear as I drew myself back up to my full height. Already, the wound in my side was filling in and healing over. "And now, she never will be."

I met Levi's eyes as I took his son's head between my hands. My own gaze was cold and unfeeling. Simon let out only one last noise—a panicked yelp.

Then, I snapped Simon's neck with a sickening crack, killing him cleanly and quickly.

Levi's reaction was equally cold. Equally unfeeling. It almost made me feel bad for Simon—almost. But not quite.

He'd tried to force himself on Bea today. She'd nearly lost her life for it.

A quick death was far better than what he truly deserved.

The silence that followed was almost deafening.

Bea stepped away from the window, her lips slightly parted in, what? Fear? Admiration? Gratitude? Shock? I couldn't tell.

Mammon and Beelzebub looked thoroughly done with this scene.

"Well met, Abaddon," said Levi. "I think we're done here—but I can assure you, I'm very eager to repay you for that little show of force when we meet again."

He gave me a nod, then snapped his fingers. At his side, Mammon and Beelzebub were quick to do the same.

With three puffs of dark smoke, in an instant, they were all gone.

A quick retreat, but a well-calculated one.

They all knew exactly what I'd do to them if they'd stayed.

"Don?" Bea stood across the room from me, staring as I dropped Simon's lifeless body to the floor. "Don...you killed him."

A sudden recollection of my promise to her tore through my chest as I met her eyes.

She'd begged for his life, all those weeks ago. I'd agreed.

Fuck.

I truly was a thing of Hell.

Of all the promises I'd kept today...that one was broken now. Simon's death couldn't be undone.

"I'm sorry, Bea." I stepped around Simon's body on weakened legs. My chest was still heaving. Inside it, my heart felt like it had been pierced by a sword as well.

I didn't feel any remorse for killing him. He'd tried to kill Bea. He'd done his best to steal her away from me and make her his.

Now, my last words to him rang true. She never would be.

But in killing him, I'd done as much damage as I had good.

Now that the deed was done, I didn't know that she was mine anymore either.

"Don..." Bea bit her lip as she continued to stare at me. I wanted desperately to hold her and tell her how terrified I'd been for her, but I didn't know if she would even let me.

I was an oath-breaker and a killer alike.

I didn't deserve to have something so perfect and precious as Bea in my arms.

"I know I broke my word, Bea." My voice was low and rough in my throat. "I don't expect you to forgive me. All I ask is that you understand that it had to be done."

"I don't need to forgive you, Don." She spoke slowly. Her voice trembled as she formed the words on her lovely lips.

I nodded. "I can accept that. Just...let me get you somewhere safe. To Ava's place, maybe. Mal can watch over you both from there. Then I'll go. You'll never have to see me again."

Raw needles of sheer agony scratched their way across my chest and a cold, dead sensation filled my stomach. My wounds were healing—but new ones had quickly formed in their place.

The kind that would never heal at all.

After all this time, all the heartache, all our struggles and losses and grief, maybe I shouldn't have been surprised. The only way I'd been able to guarantee Bea's safety had resulted in me losing her for good.

But at least she'd live on. She'd find someone else to love someday, someone else to marry and grow old with. I'd hate him, whoever he was, but as long as he was good to her, I'd suffer his existence.

I knew that whoever had her would love her. Bea was an easy woman to love. My only regret was that I couldn't be the one she loved anymore.

Not after what I'd just done.

"What are you talking about, Don?" Bea blinked, her brow furrowed with confusion. "Never have to see you again... You're my husband. You saved me. Why would you say a thing like that?"

"You said you couldn't forgive me, Bea." Of all the injuries I'd sustained today, that one had hurt the most.

And it was all my damn fault.

She stared at me for a long, awful moment. Then, of all things, she laughed. A beautiful sound, even though in the moment it felt somewhat cruel.

"I said I didn't need to forgive you." She moved toward me and wrapped her arms around my waist. When she looked up at me, there was nothing but love in her eyes. "There's nothing to forgive."

My heart spasmed. It felt like salvation. Redemption. Losing Bea was like dying. Under the grace of her absolution, I was reborn anew.

"I'm pregnant, Don," Bea whispered. She held my gaze for just long enough to smile at the surprise that crossed my face, then folded her body against mine. "And I'm tired. Take me home?"

"You're..." Every muscle in my body tensed. My heart was racing for whole new reasons now. I took her face in my hands and forced her to look up at me. "You're *pregnant*? Really? You mean it? You're sure?"

Bea laughed again. It put sparkles in her eyes as her smile broadened. "I am. Or at least, Leviathan said I am. That's...that's what all of this was about." Her smile faded far too quickly. A look of worry appeared on her face in its wake. "I don't know if he was telling the truth or not. But if he is... he wants our baby, Don. If he can't have ours, then he wants Ava's, or Joan's."

"He wants..." This was too much too quickly. Even for me. "Why? He can have children of his own. I doubt that Simon was the first—or the last, for that matter."

Bea opened her mouth, then closed it again. When she spoke, her words trembled on her lips before they fell.

"I think he wants the child of a demon and a human to help him end the world."

The news was still hitting me—she might be pregnant. I'd felt elated when she told me. Surprised, but thrilled. But my initial excitement was now tempered with anger and fear as well.

And urgency.

I needed to get Bea out of here. *Now*.

“He’s not going to get our baby, or his wishes.” I kissed her quickly and drew her to the place where the veil was thin. “We’re leaving. I need to take you somewhere that Leviathan can’t reach. After that...”

I paused and placed my hand against her stomach, feeling for something. Anything. Leviathan’s words were impossible to trust, but if I could only sense the smallest stirring within her...

“Do you think you’re really—” I started.

“I don’t know if I’m actually—” Bea said at the same time.

We stared at each other for a moment, then let out twin sighs.

Pregnant. We left the word unspoken between us.

Soon, I supposed, we’d have to find that out for ourselves.

“We’ll figure all of this out. Together. I promise,” I told her as I opened the Abyss once more. Then, I spread my wings, took her into my arms, and took flight.

“*Together*,” Bea breathed, an echo. She wound her arms around my neck and cuddled her cheek against my chest. “You have no idea how good that sounds right now.”

But that’s where she was wrong.

It was one of the sweetest words I’d ever known.

BEA

“Don...where are we?” I asked as Don carried me across the threshold between the Abyss and Earth once more.

The place he’d taken me to was full of green trees and sunshine. In front of us, a beautiful, massive cabin sprawled. It looked like some kind of fancy ski resort. My parents had taken me to plenty of places just like it when I was younger—although only when there was snow on the ground.

Right now, though, the entire environment was lush and full of life.

“Safest place in the world right now, darling.” Don placed me back on my feet and took my hand in his. “As far away from the reach of Hell as we can get.”

“And...where exactly is that?”

He gave me a wry smile. “Woodstock, Vermont. This is where Luke and Evie live. Their baby, too.”

“Lily. I remember.” I’d given up every memory I had of Don to keep Lily safe. I hadn’t even had to think about it. It had been instant and instinctual.

Despite all of the shit that had happened today, I couldn’t help but feel a little excited. It would be nice to meet the little girl who I’d happily thrown my life into disarray over. Her mother, too.

Evie and I had been close, once upon a memory.

Maybe we would be again.

“Are they expecting us?” I glanced up at the door. “It feels a little weird, bursting right in like this. I mean...you’ve still got blood on your shirt.”

I plucked at the place where Leviathan’s dagger had pierced Don’s skin. Beneath it, all that remained of the wound was a pinkish scar, but the shirt was still torn and stained dark with demonic blood.

“They’re our people, Bea. They’re not going to turn us away.”

With confidence, Don squeezed my hand.

I hoped they still remembered us, even if I’d mostly forgotten them.

Even more so, I hoped Don was right.

It had been a long day, and it wasn’t quite over yet. But after everything...

It would be nice, at least, to be in a place where we were safe. Even if it was just for a little while.

A beautiful Black woman dressed in high-waisted blue jeans and a Grateful Dead t-shirt that she’d knotted at her waist opened the door when Don knocked. She had a head full of dark, thick curls and slender, well-muscled arms.

She didn’t look like someone that I wanted to cross. But in a weird, distant kind of way, I felt safer already just for being near her.

She seemed like the kind of person who would take one look at a man like Levi and happily kick his ass without a single thought.

“Abaddon? What are you doing—” The woman’s dark eyes trailed over to me. Her mouth fell open, shocked. “Bea? Is that really you?”

“Well, it’s not the queen of England.” I forced a smile, suddenly all too aware of how strange this must be for her—whoever she was.

She remembered me, obviously. But since I didn’t remember her...

She must have been another one of Don’s demon friends. Someone from Hell who I’d been forced to forget.

Which meant she probably hadn’t expected to ever see me again.

“It’s good to see you, Legion,” Don said. He put his arm around me and pushed me forward a little bit, like he was presenting me to her for the first time. “Bea, this is Leigh. Leigh...meet my wife.”

“Oh, holy shit,” Leigh swore. She looked between the two of us, then nodded. “Well, come in then. It’s been a hectic morning. We’re only just now getting around to breakfast. It sounds like you’ve got one hell of a story to catch us all up on.”

“We do,” Don assured her. “And thank you. Breakfast sounds nice.”

At the kitchen table, we walked in on a beautiful scene. A handsome, dark-haired man was making airplane noises as he swooped a tiny bite of pancakes through the air with a tiny fork. He was feeding an adorable little girl who couldn’t have been more than a year old. She had dark, curly hair with a pale streak of blonde that ran through her bangs, and big blue eyes.

Lucifer and Lily. Evie’s husband and child.

Seated beneath Lily was a gorgeous blonde woman in a robe and nightgown. She looked up at me as we entered the kitchen behind Leigh.

Her eyes widened as her gaze met mine.

“Oh, holy—” she started, stopping herself only a moment before she swore in the exact same way that Leigh had. “Bea. Is that really...”

I bit my tongue, narrowly avoiding telling the same bad joke twice.

“It’s me,” I said with a nod. My mouth opened, her name on my tongue. *Evie*. But somehow, that didn’t feel right. Like I’d called her something else before, back before angels had whisked it all away. After a moment, it came to me. “Hi, Eves.”

“Hi, Bea.” She pursed her lips together. It looked like she was fighting back tears—but thankfully, they looked like the happy kind. “You remembered.”

“Not all of it,” I admitted. My eyes weren’t exactly feeling dry at the moment either. “But enough. How could I ever forget you?”

She passed Lily over to her husband and rose from the table, then rushed over to me. Her arms wrapped around me tightly, like she was afraid if she didn’t squeeze me hard enough I might slip away again.

“You have no idea how good it is to see you again, Bea.”

I found myself smiling as I hugged her back. Something was definitely tugging at my heartstrings and tear ducts, too.

“You know, you might think that... But actually, I kind of do.”

Lucifer—distantly, I recalled calling him Luke—blinked, then nodded to the table.

“Well, sit down and get some breakfast, then.” He spoke with a British accent, but not a terribly posh one. It was comforting in its roughness. Like Leigh, he felt like the kind of man who would put Levi in his place. Just like Don had. He rose with Lily balanced on his hip to grab a few more plates. “If you’re both here, then I imagine pancakes won’t help

anything—but there’s plenty to go around, and a solid meal probably couldn’t hurt. You can tell us everything between bites.”

Legion took Lily off to play while Don started to explain. There was a lot to cover—enough, in fact, to fill an entire book. While Don talked, a chubby corgi wandered into the kitchen and sat down next to my chair.

“*Bruff!*” he barked softly. Then, he put his little feet up on the edge of my chair and nudged at my side. “*Bruff!*”

“No. *Down*,” Evie whispered. She gave me an apologetic look. “Sorry. The Beast isn’t trying to be rude—I think he just wants to introduce himself. Or...reintroduce himself, I guess.”

“His name is...The Beast?” It was an awful big name for a little dog, but in a way, it kind of seemed to suit him.

“It is,” Evie said. “I guess I’ve got a lot to fill you in on, too.”

When Don was finished catching them up on everything save for this morning’s occurrences, he sighed and reached for the cup of coffee that Luke had poured him.

I knew he’d need the extra energy. Explaining the rest of the reason why we were here today wasn’t going to be a fun task. Being the bearer of bad news never was.

“There are dark days ahead of us, I think. It’s not just Bea that’s in danger. It’s Joan and Ava too.”

Luke nodded, then called Leigh back into the room. She appeared a few moments later with Lily on her hip.

“Thank you for watching her,” Luke said with a grim smile. “But I need you to go to Mal and Lock now. They’ll fill you in on everything. See what you can do for them once you’re caught up. It sounds like they’re going to need all the help they can get.”

“Sounds like a blast.” Leigh placed Lily back down on the floor, then headed to the door. “I’ll check in tonight.” She shot me a tense smile. “Good seeing you again, Bea. Try not to die while I’m gone.”

“You too, Leigh,” I said. “On both counts.”

“Will you be staying with us, then?” Luke asked, arching an eyebrow as he picked Lily up. He hauled her back over to the kitchen table and sat down to bounce her on his knee. “You’re welcome to, you know. It’s safe here, and Lily’s always happy for more playmates.”

“I’d like it, too,” Evie admitted. She reached for my hand and gave it a squeeze. “I never thought I’d see you again, Bea. We can make up one of

the guest suites for you both, if you like. I mean, if you want to stay. We're not trying to hold you hostage or anything, but it'd be nice to know you're safe. And to have a chance to catch up, too."

She held my gaze for a moment, then stuck her tongue out at me.

A surprising amount of laughter shook through my chest. She was probably right—we *did* have a lot of catching up to do. But somehow at the same time, it felt like I'd never forgotten her at all.

"We might not have any choice but to stay," Don admitted. "Bea is, ah..."

He looked to me and I gave him an awkward smile.

Normally, this wouldn't even be discussed until the second trimester. But if there was really so much at stake here...I guessed we'd have to let the cat out of the bag a little early.

"I might be pregnant," I admitted. "I don't know but...we've been given reason to suspect."

"Oh my god." Evie clapped her hand over her mouth to stifle a laugh. "No way. Okay—what are your symptoms? Do your boobs hurt? Are you getting the tightness across like..." She moved her hand from one of her hips to the other. "Right here?" She narrowed her eyes. "Are your feet doing weird things?"

"My...feet?" I hadn't even realized weird foot things were part of it.

Evie winced. "Don't worry about it. If it was happening...you'd know."

"I don't have any symptoms yet," I admitted. "That's why we're not entirely sure. But..."

"Leviathan reared his ugly head again," Don told Luke.

Luke's face fell in an instant. Suddenly, he looked incredibly tired. "Of course he did."

"He seems to be of the opinion that Bea is with child. *My child*," Don explained.

"He told me that he was behind the prophecies that were delivered to Heaven and Hell. The ones about Lily." My eyes wandered down to the little girl on Luke's lap. She was doing something silly with her hands, idly touching all of her fingertips together then releasing them one by one.

"I Wiwwy!" she announced, grinning at the sound of her own name. She repeated it a second time, triumphantly and even louder as she jabbed a chubby thumb against her chest.

She was so sweet and innocent. It didn't seem fair that she'd been born into all of this responsibility. No one-year-old should have had the fate of the world hanging over her head like this.

And from the sounds of things, if I really was pregnant...

Soon, she wouldn't be alone in that fate.

Luke smoothed down Lily's dark curls and sighed. "I should have guessed that Leviathan was behind all this. When he broke from the rest of the Fallen, I knew he'd be up to no good—but he's a hard man to keep track of, unfortunately, and he doesn't exactly like to make his whereabouts known to me. Did he happen to mention what the real prophecy claimed?"

"Lily will change the world—and she's not the only one," I told him. "Me, Ava and Joan...he seems to think we're all fated to have children with demons. He wanted my baby so he could raise it to..."

"To end the world," Don finished for me. "We have no reason to suspect he was bluffing about Bea being pregnant, except—"

"Except that anything he says could be a lie." Luke shook his head. "Figuring out what he's really planning is like peeling an onion. There's always the potential for another layer underneath."

"Exactly," Don agreed. "And we have no way of knowing when we get to the core."

"Well, there is *one* thing that we can figure out for sure," said Evie. "I've got some pregnancy tests in the bathroom. Luke and I, um..." She blushed, then laughed. "We might be trying for another baby. And if you don't trust Levi's judgment... They're supposed to be ninety-nine percent accurate, answers in ten minutes or less. That's what they say on the box, anyway. Do you want one?"

I bit my lip, glanced at Don, then nodded.

"I think that's a good idea," I said. "If this is really happening...yeah. We should do it. I want to be sure."

Even as I said the words, I could almost feel something stirring inside me. Now that all the excitement of the day was finally over and the sense of general dread was gone, I was surprised that I hadn't noticed it sooner.

I didn't want to get my hopes up—but then again, I didn't even know what I was hoping for anymore.

As Evie motioned for me to follow her down the hall, I closed my eyes for a brief moment.

I didn't pray often. For a long time, I hadn't believed in the existence of anything I could pray to at all.

But now, I believed in a lot of things.

If angels and demons were real... maybe answers to anxious prayers were, too.

Please, I called out in my mind. I didn't even know what I was supposed to ask for. A baby that would change the entire world? That seemed like a little much. Instead, I furrowed my brow and felt out my heartbeat. *Just...let everything be okay.*

I opened my eyes again, not expecting an answer.

But as I stepped forward to follow Evie, I felt something. Gentle, so gentle I almost missed it at first...but definitely there.

The slightest weight of a hand on my shoulder, giving it a little squeeze.

When I looked behind me to see if it was Don, or maybe even Leigh or Luke, I didn't see anyone at all, though.

The space behind me was empty.

But—in the best way possible—I didn't feel alone.

Okay then, I thought to God—or the Almighty—or whatever we were calling things now. *I'm glad you're here. But don't come into the bathroom with me. I'm sure you're a cool guy, and I appreciate your support—but when I pee on this baby stick, I'd like to do it private. All right?*

And as crazy as it sounded, I could have sworn I heard soft, warm laughter in response. Not in the hall with me, but somewhere inside my heart.

DON

In the room that Evie and Luke had made up for us, I leaned my back against the headboard of the bed. Bea was settled between my thighs, curled up against my chest. I held her close while we both stared at the pregnancy test on the nightstand. Any minute now, it would be done.

The Beast had elected to join us. He was curled protectively on top of one of Bea's feet. Occasionally, he would grumble, then glance curiously between us and the pregnancy test as well.

It was almost like he already knew what it was going to say.

"Okay. That's time, then." When the alarm Bea had set went off, she placed her phone aside then reached for the test. Before she looked at it, she paused and turned to look at me. "How are you feeling?"

"Ready," I said with a nod. More ready than I'd ever been—no matter the results. "You?"

"I'm nervous," Bea admitted. "But I'm ready too. I know I love you. I know that if Levi was right—if I really am pregnant—I'll love our child just as much."

"What are you nervous about, kitten?" I smiled at her confidently, even though my heart rate was quickening. The results of this test would change everything for us. For the world too, from the sounds of things. "Whatever Levi told you, it's at least confirmed one thing for us."

"That we shouldn't go trusting bankers?" Bea quipped. She held the pregnancy test in her hands, with her thumbs over the screen so neither of

us could peek until we were truly ready.

“No. Well—yes. But other than that.” I curled my hands over hers and gave her fingers a squeeze. “He truly believes that the way these children are raised is the most important thing in determining what effect they’ll have on the world. We know that they’re going to change things. If they’re raised with kindness and love, they’ll change things for the better. You’re going to be a great mother. I can already feel it. If you’re pregnant, I know there’s no one who can give this baby more love than you.”

“What if I’m not?” Bea bit her lip. “I wasn’t exactly raised in the worst environment or anything...but it wasn’t full of love, either.”

I laughed. I didn’t mean to be dismissive of her, but if there’s one thing I knew about Bea, it was that she had more love to give the world than most other people combined.

“Don’t be ridiculous, Bea.” I pressed a kiss to her cheek, then shifted my hands to rest over her belly. “I can feel how much love you have within you. Goodness and kindness, too. I feel it every morning when I wake up and you smile at me. I feel it every night when you kiss me before you fall asleep.”

“I hope you’re right,” Bea sighed. Her voice was tense, and her body felt even more so.

“I am. Now—let’s see what we’re dealing with here.” I glanced down at the test again, but was distracted by something shining and golden around Bea’s wrist. “Wait.”

“What’s wrong?”

“Where did you get this?” I plucked at the golden charm bracelet around her wrist. It didn’t really suit her. The charms were all ugly as sin—dragons and pentagrams and medallions bearing ugly faces. Tacky, if I was being completely honest.

“Oh. That.” Bea snorted. “Simon put it around my wrist when I got into the limo with them earlier. It did something to block my powers. I’d completely forgotten about it.”

“All that training for nothing.” I laughed. There was something funny about exercises in futility, I supposed. Especially now that we knew we’d won regardless. “As it turns out, that pretty head on your shoulders was a far better weapon than hellfire.”

“I don’t know that I’d say we trained for nothing.” Bea gave me a wry smile. “I liked fighting with you, you know.”

I smiled back at her. “I liked fighting with you, too.”

I took the bracelet into my hands and snapped it with ease. Whatever dark magic was on it, it was still only made of gold. Every chain was only as strong as its weakest link—even the magical ones.

“Oh. Wow. That feels...a lot better. Thank you.” Bea lifted the pregnancy test up again. “Are we ready for this now?”

“Ready,” I assured her. “Definitely.”

As Bea uncovered the results, The Beast turned his head up at me and began panting. It made him look like he was smiling.

He knew. Little shit. He’d known from the moment we walked in.

And in the second just before Bea spoke, I realized I knew as well.

“We’re pregnant, Don.” Bea turned to me, holding the test up so I could see it. “We’re really—”

“Damn right we are.” I took her face in my hands and kissed her hard.

She was so surprised by it, it took her a moment to kiss me back—but when she did, my entire body felt like it was glowing. Behind my eyelids, I could see the faintest glow of a light filling the room.

I opened my eyes.

A golden light.

“What...what’s happening?” Bea stared up at me, blinking, then glanced down at her own hand. “Don...why are we glowing?”

“Because...” I breathed, my voice full of tempered awe. “The Almighty is smiling down on us. Remember what Evie said?”

“Yes, but...” Bea held her face up to her hand, playing with the light with open wonder. “What does it mean?”

“It means we’ve pleased the big guy, kitten.” I laughed. The Almighty didn’t show Himself frequently—at least, not in obvious ways. But if this was what it took for him to show his approval—a human and a demon having a baby together—then I wasn’t about to complain. “It means the three of us have His protection now. We’re going to be safe.”

He was a little slow on the uptake this time around, of course.

You could have done that back at Leviathan Financial, you know, I thought with a glance up toward Heaven. You have quite the sense of dramatics, don’t you?

I didn’t hear an answer. I supposed I didn’t need one.

Everything I needed, I had right here on this bed and in my arms.

Nine months later

We called her Abigail. Abbie for short. It was like the name of where she'd been conceived—the Abyss.

Someday, when she was older, it would belong to her.

Just as much as I belonged to Don.

“She’s a sweet thing, isn’t she?” Luke chuckled as he tried to take his finger back from her. She grunted, clutching it even tighter in her chubby little fist. “Stubborn as hell, though.”

“She gets that from her mother.” Gently, Don unwound Abbie’s fingers, smiling down at her. His gray eyes were full of love. “Anything you hand her, you know she’s going to keep tight hold on.”

“And what have I ever held onto so tightly?” I was sitting in the living room of Luke and Evie’s place in Vermont. It had been a long labor—twenty-six hours, to be exact. We’d only just gotten back from the hospital. I was still exhausted, and the armchair beneath me was plush and comfy enough, I feared the second everyone stopped talking, I’d fall asleep in it.

“Bea has a point.” Evie perched on the arm of the chair and smoothed my hair down the back of my head. When I glanced up at her, we shared a

look of amusement. I may have forgotten all the finer points of our friendship from before my memories had been taken, but over the course of my pregnancy, we'd had a chance to become friends all over again. "She gave up so much of her life to stay in the Inferno with me after I married Luke. She gave up her memories to keep Lily safe. And now, she's given up her family's company too. If you ask me, your wife is a very generous person, Don. What *hasn't* she let go of through all of this?"

"My heart," Don said. He stared down at me intensely. "She's got a death grip on it. I fear she'll never let go."

"I fear you're right." I smiled up at him. "That's mine now. You can't have it back, either."

"Ah, well." Don knelt before me and dipped down to kiss my knuckles as I cradled our newborn child. "At least it's in good hands."

Baby Abbie's eyes opened slightly as Don and I turned our gazes back to her. She was so small still, it was hard to tell exactly what color they would be, but if I had to guess, I'd place my bets on Don's grays. She was red and wrinkled and a little gremlin-looking in the way that all newborns sort of were, but her lips were full like mine. Her nose was straight and elegant, like Don's.

I knew she'd be beautiful when she grew up.

With a demon for a father and me for a mother, she'd probably be a handful as well. But like Don had said, she was in good hands indeed—and not just mine, either.

We all turned to the door as a bellow sounded from down the hall. A set of tiny, quick-moving, thumping feet followed, along with the clickety-clack of nails tapping against the hardwood floors.

"Wanna...see the...baby!" a little voice roared. A moment later, Luke and Evie's daughter, Lily, came trundling in on wobbly legs. Her brow was set into a ferocious scowl. The Beast raced behind her on its own stumpy legs, hot on her heels.

Leigh entered a moment later, looking exasperated. Her dark coils of hair flowed around her head like a storm cloud threatening to break into thunder and lightning at any moment now.

"I'm sure you do, kiddo." Leigh placed her hands on her hips and stared down at Lily sternly. "But if you want to go talk to her so badly, you're gonna have to ask her parents first."

Lily was blonde like her mother. Her chubby cheeks were bright pink with frustration, but her pale blue eyes softened as they fell upon Abbie and me across the room.

“Can I?” Lily blinked innocently, toddling a few tentative steps closer. “Pweeeese?”

I glanced at Don, then laughed. “Come here, then. But we have to be gentle with her, okay? She’s too little to play with just yet.”

Lily crept forward, then put her little hands on my knee so she could peer down at Abbie’s face.

“I’m Wiwwy,” Lily whispered down to Abbie. Her tiny voice was adorable, especially with the way she was still struggling to pronounce her *ls*, but the look in her eyes was an intensely serious one. “We’re being fwends.”

There was something about the way she said it that made little pop rocks explode inside my heart. When I looked up at Evie, I could tell she felt it too.

“*Bruff*,” The Beast added, popping his paws up on the edge of the chair to sniff gently at Abbie. He seemed to be in agreement with this arrangement as well.

“Why don’t you let the three of us look after Abbie for a while?” Evie offered gently. “My parents will be here any minute, so she’ll have plenty of people to cuddle her.”

“I imagine the two of you might like to spend a little alone time,” Luke added. “It would be no bother at all.”

I looked to Don, who nodded in agreement. Then, I passed Abbie over into Evie’s capable arms.

“Oh!” Evie yelped and drew back as Abbie gave a tiny sneeze. With it came a small burst of smoke and flame from Abbie’s tiny nose.

We all stared at each other for a moment, then started to laugh.

“All right,” Don admitted. “So she might take after me a little as well.”

“I’ll say she does.” Evie shook her head, still grinning in disbelief. “These two little girls are more like their daddies than we ever could’ve imagined.”

Clinging to Luke’s leg, Lily giggled and squealed as Luke walked her out into the kitchen. Leigh followed behind, then Evie with Abbie in her arms.

I watched them go and sighed contentedly. My body felt pretty wrecked still, but my chest was warm and full of light. Full of love, too.

This was a place where love lived. Especially with Don here at my side.

“You look tired, kitten. I know you must be.” Don smoothed his fingertips down my cheek. “The others will look after Abbie for a while. Why don’t you let me carry you off to bed so you can get some rest?”

“We should call Ava first.” I fought back a yawn. As tempting as Don’s offer was, I couldn’t quite allow myself to drift off just yet. I felt safe here in Woodstock, but there were people that we still cared about out on their own in the world—and what a treacherous world it was now. “She’ll want to hear all about Abbie...and I want to make sure that Levi and his friends aren’t hassling her now that I’m out of the picture.”

“We can do it tomorrow, when you’ve had some rest. Remember, Mal’s still watching over her. He won’t let her out of his sight,” Don reminded me. “And from the sounds of things, Ava’s mother and all their friends have their own kinds of protections in place as well.”

“Joan’s still missing in action, too.” I glanced at my purse where Don had left it near the couch across the room. Within it was my phone, which was full of messages and emails that Joan hadn’t even looked at yet. The last I’d heard from her had been the day that Don and I had arrived here in Vermont, when I’d messaged her and Ava to let them know I was pregnant—and that they needed to be careful, too. She hadn’t been able to tell me where she was. She’d been completely off the grid ever since. I knew Joan could look out for herself—but what if she’d finally run into something that even she couldn’t beat the snot out of? It was a harrowing thought. “Wherever work has taken her, it must be somewhere very remote—or very secret. I hope she’s all right.”

“Lock will find Joan.” Don pulled my hand to his cheek and nuzzled against my knuckles. “He’s not the kind of man who knows how to lose.”

“I worry about them all anyway,” I admitted. Joan was the fiercest person I’d ever met, and Ava was incredibly clever. But still, now that I’d seen what we were all up against, I knew that it wouldn’t be easy going until Levi, Zeb and Mammon were finally defeated once and for all. “I hope Mal and Lock know what they’re doing. I hope we can help them—and stay safe ourselves in the process, too.”

“Everything’s going to be okay,” he promised me. “I mean it when I say I’d give my life for you. For you both. But we have the Almighty’s protection now, too. Somewhere up Above, we have a very powerful man looking out for us.”

“You know, I think you might be right.” I glanced back at the doorway. In the kitchen, I could hear Evie’s parents come in through the side door. Immediately, the sound of delighted cooing and Abbie’s name filled the air. “She has an awful lot of people who love her already—and, I mean, you saw that sneeze.”

“Yes, she’s going to be a very dangerous girl indeed,” Don agreed. He flicked his gaze up to meet mine. “Just like her mother, I think.”

“Do you really think I’m dangerous?” I asked with a laugh. “After all the trouble I’ve put you through...”

“Oh, Bea. You really have no idea.” Don shook his head, chuckling. “You stole the heart of a king of Hell, didn’t you?”

“I’ll let you in on a little secret, Don.” I twitched my finger at him, beckoning him closer. He obliged, bringing his face close to mine so I could whisper in his ear. “You’re a very easy man to steal from. I didn’t even have to try.”

When Don pulled away again, there was a smile on his lips that wouldn’t quit.

“No, I suppose you didn’t,” he agreed—then he kissed me, long and hard and just as passionately as he had on the day I became his wife. “But you’ve certainly got it now, kitten. I love you. With all my heart.”

“I love you too,” I told him. “I really do.”

Then, Don made good on one last promise to me.

He scooped me up and carried me off to bed, cradled safely in his arms.

LOCK

I searched for her for what felt like an eternity.

In a way, that was far too true.

I wasn't a chaste man. Far from it. Throughout the ages, I'd had my fill of the lasses. In scores, I'd kissed them, and I'd fucked them, and yes—I'd loved them too. But unlike Don and Mal, I'd never considered myself much of a one-woman man.

At least, not until now.

Human lasses were fragile and fleeting. Even the fierce, dark-eyed warrior women who'd stolen my heart.

It hadn't struck me before now that they might all be the *same* damn lass.

Not that I was complaining, mind.

My Joanie. My Joan. Ferocious and feisty and never one to back down from a battle, even when she knew there was no way she'd win. Even when she was fighting against fate itself.

I'd fallen for women just like her more times than I could count. Suppose you could say I had a type.

Her.

Now that I knew Lucifer's bride was far from the only woman who'd spent the entire history of the Earth living and dying and living again, I knew it must be true.

She was my soulmate. My destiny. And I was hers.

Course, would've been nice if she hadn't made herself so damn difficult to track down this time around.

I watched her from across the room. At the bar, she was ordering a drink. I knew exactly what it'd be: Whiskey. Scotch. Neat.

Always loved me a woman who knew how to hold her drink.

Her hair was black as night and cropped to her jawline in a messy French bob. It made her look like one of those silver screen starlets. She was certainly pretty enough to be. Elfin and petite, like a pixie. Delicate—and all the more dangerous for her looks.

I knew why she didn't keep her hair long. When she was in the throes of a fight, it gave her opponents less to grab onto. That pretty face of hers just lured them into a false sense of security.

I liked that too—the way people always underestimated her.

I knew that look of surprise on their faces always made it all the more satisfying for her when she kicked their asses to the floor.

Her cheeks were tinged pink as she tapped her fingers against the bar—but she was no blushing belle. Her bare shoulders beneath the ties of her halter top were softly tanned, kissed by the sun. She'd just flown in from Egypt, I knew.

I'd been on the same flight, sitting just behind her in first class. From take-off to landing, I'd had to fight back the urge to catch her hand and pull her into my lap when she walked by.

The official story was that she was doing work abroad for the UN, but now that I was partnered with Adversary Industries once more, I knew the truth.

She was working for them. Tracking down ancient, powerful things and collecting them for Leviathan and all his minions. Digging up artifacts that were best left buried. If they'd been meant to see the light of day, I wouldn't have put them underground to begin with.

And now, she'd been called back to Vegas by Leviathan himself. The little merger he'd orchestrated between his company and Adversary Industries had been quite the blow at first. But now, I knew it for what it was: More destiny. More fate.

It was a good thing I was now working with Adversary Industries again as well.

"Suppose I should congratulate you, Moloch." Beelzebub clapped me on the shoulder as he returned to our table with drinks of our own. I was

having scotch, same as her. Zeb had ordered something swirling and black with a wee cocktail umbrella floating on top of it—weird fucker. Knowing him, it was probably vodka mixed with demon blood. “Glad you finally came back to the dark—and to your senses. It’s good to be on the same side again, isn’t it?”

“Aye,” I said emphatically, nodding along. “Dinnae ken how I could’ve kept it on with the others for much longer. Not in our nature, takin’ the knee to the angels. Lucifer and Abaddon and Malacoda...ich. All gone a bit soft, haven’t they?”

“Too true,” Zeb agreed. “Far too true.”

Poor lad. Zeb was as daft as he was strange.

I didn’t mean a single word of it—but we were both Fallen. Liars from birth.

Right now, my lies were exactly the ones he wanted to hear.

“She’s lovely, isn’t she?” Zeb commented, nodding to Joan. “Kitten on the outside, hellcat within. Angel in the streets—”

“Mind yerself,” I warned him, pointing a finger right between his eyes. “Just because I’m workin’ with ye again now doesna mean ye’ve got rights to go gawking at my woman. Ye’ll keep yer eyes and hands off her, lest I decide tae take ‘em and find somewhere more useful to put ‘em. Up yer arse, most like.”

That, I meant. Every word. The last thing I needed was for Zeb to decide that brotherhood between demons meant sharing.

When it came to her, I was a greedy bastard indeed.

I hunched over the table and glanced over at her again. She took a sip of her scotch, closed her eyes and sighed. I could practically hear her purring with pleasure from here.

It took all the strength of my body and the power of my will not to march right over there, take her whiskey-flavored lips against mine, and see what other sounds she might make.

She’d smack me for it, aye, but that was a small price to pay for reclaiming what I’d lost. What was still mine.

“Are you going to give all her memories back to her?” Zeb asked as he stirred his cocktail. My threat seemed to have struck home with him. He kept his eyes far away from her now. “Forcing them back into her mind would be quick—and it wouldn’t even be hard.”

I scoffed. “Now, why in the ever-loving’ fuck would I go and do that?”

“Two of the children who will determine the fate of the Earth have already been born,” Zeb reminded me. “You’re one kiss away from winning her back. Play your cards right, and nine months from tonight we’d finally have the third child—on our side, this time.”

He was right about one thing—I *was* just one kiss away from making Joanie mine again.

But the rest...ach. Poor bastard. He didn’t have fucking clue.

“I would,” I said with a laugh. “But that’d be too easy.”

She might have forgotten me, but I hadn’t forgotten her. Not in the least.

And from my recollections, Joan liked things nice and hard.

“What’s your plan, then?” Zeb asked. “I can get you close to her, but the rest is up to you.”

“Ah, a little of this, little of that,” I said with a shrug. “Reckon I’ll just have to make her fall for me all over again.”

And when I did—because I would—I’d make good on that threat I’d made to Zeb whether he laid a hand on her or not. He was a danger to her, and to everyone I cared about for as long as he lived.

I’d enjoy killing him, I’d already decided that much. I’d kill Leviathan and Mammon and anyone else who’d stood between me and her.

We all paid prices in this world for the things we did and didn’t do. They’d gone for far too long without chipping in what was due.

So, aye. I’d make her fall for me. I’d make her mine again.

And once that was over—well.

Like I’d said. Joan was always up for a fight.

Together, we’d come to collect.



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FOREWORD

*“ Ae fond kiss, and then we sever;
Ae fareweel, and then for ever!
Deep in heart-wrung tears I'll pledge thee,
Warring sighs and groans I'll wage thee.
Who shall say that fortune grieves him,
While the star of hope she leaves him?
Me, nae cheerfu' twinkle lights me;
Dark despair around benights me.”*

—Robert Burns
“Ae Fond Kiss”

PROLOGUE

LOCK

I've never been much for losing, my sweetheart, *mo leannan*. It's never suited me. No glory in defeat.

Since Heaven was raised and the Earth was first formed, there's never been a battle I've seen reason to back down from. When I fight, I fight to win.

But then came you, lass. My love, *mo ghràdh*. My heart, *mo chridhe*. If it was the arrows of some fat, meddling cherub that struck me when I first saw your face, they sank in clean and buried themselves in my heart forever deep. The first fall of my lifetime may have been my tumble from Heaven into Hell. It was nothing in comparison to how hard I fell for you.

A human. A warrior. A beauty. You were a fierce creature and a delicate one. You've always had my same hunger, Joan. My same refusal to back down even when the odds of winning were slim to none.

But where I was doomed to pick myself up after every bloodshed, alive and unharmed, you were destined to die in my arms. To be reborn. To live and die again.

Over and over throughout the centuries, our paths have crossed like clashing broadswords. Like inauspicious stars. The Almighty blessed us with our love, yes. Damned us to lose it, too.

I was born a stubborn, angry bastard, Joanie. When the day comes for death to finally claim me, I reckon I'll die that way.

And when I do draw that fateful, final breath, I know the cold ache of it will pale in comparison to the pain of losing you.

You don't know it yet, lass, but we've done this little dance of ours before. In past lives, and in this life as well.

You don't remember me. I know you won't. You memories of our time together were stolen on the wings of angels and carried off for the good of all humanity, or so Heaven claims.

Once again, I had you and couldn't keep you.

Once again, I failed to keep you safe.

I lost a part of me the last time we said goodbye. Every time you go, a part of me dies.

I don't know that I can ever be that man you loved again, Joan.

But if you can love me now—this war-battered, broken man who yearns for you even when you have no recollection of the shape of my heart or the look of my face...

This time, I'll stop at nothing to claim you. To protect you. To hold you in my arms every night and bring a smile to your lips with every day.

We may be well damned, Joan Bouchard—but we'll be damned together.

We'll fight the good fight. This time, we'll win.

We'll love without losing. We'll even the odds.

With swords in hand, we'll cut the binding knots of fate.

JOAN

The handsome bearded man at the poker table was holding a devil's hand. Three of a kind, all sixes. I'd peeked at it over his broad shoulder in passing when the dealer dealt him in.

It was hard to say whether it was a good omen or a bad one. Definitely a sign either way.

It only made sense that tonight would start off with the number of the beast.

The heels of my strappy black leather Jimmy Choos clicked like a rock drummer counting off a beat as I moved across the casino's floor. I'd never been much of a gambler. How people could let themselves spend so much time in places like this, I didn't think I'd ever fully understand.

Playing a game or two was fun while it lasted, sure. But sticking around for too long trying your luck was a good way to lose a lot of perfectly good, hard-earned cash. It was part of why I was wandering. The flashing lights of the slot machines were pretty. The endless drinks at the card tables, enticing.

Frankly, I didn't want to let myself get sucked in.

The odds were always stacked in dealer's favor.

The house always won in the end.

The other part of why I was wandering: I needed to meet a man tonight. An important one.

I didn't know exactly what he looked like, but I hoped he'd be hot as Hell.

Even if he wasn't, it didn't matter.

Tomorrow night, I'd become his wife.

But, hey. A girl could dream, right?

There were plenty of good-looking men in the casino that night. Any one of them could be my future husband. Would it be the dark-haired one with the charming grin who had me blow on his dice every time I walked by? Hopefully not. Every time I passed him, he had fewer chips than the last.

By the time he finally got up and walked away from his table, I was relieved.

I didn't want to break it to him, but I was pretty sure I'd been bringing him bad luck.

"Buy you a drink, sweetheart?" A blond in Versace with slicked-back hair and green eyes slipped into the seat next to me the second I sat down at the bar. "You're looking pretty thirsty in that hot little dress there."

I turned and let my gaze travel up and down his body. Not bad looking, but he smelled like too much liquor covered up with even more cologne. My dress was a tight black number with a bustier top from Agent Provocateur. Maybe I did look thirsty in it—but from the way he was wobbling on his barstool as he gawked at my tits, he didn't strike me as a man who could hold his drink.

"That's cute, but no thanks." I placed my purse on the bartop and waved down the bartender. "I buy my own drinks."

"Yeah? You're one of those females who's too good to let a man take care of you, huh?" Every word he spoke, he slurred. Definitely too drunk.

I turned away from him to laugh. "Even if you did find a woman desperate enough to give you a shot, *sweetheart*, I don't think you'd even know where to start."

"Jesus. Just tryin' to be nice," he spat at me, reeling back. "You don't have to be such a bitch, you know."

"Oh, I'm aware I don't have to be," I agreed. Amateur. I didn't have time for this. *Tryin' to be nice*, my ass. "I'm doing this by choice."

The blond's face went white for a second, then furiously red as he blinked at me incredulously. "What? Who the fuck do you think you—"

“Right. Fuck off, ye wee twat.” The rolling *rs* of a Scottish brogue washed over me from behind. A broad, thick-knuckled palm pressed against the blond’s lapel, pushing him backwards on his bar stool. I caught a glorious glimpse of Mr. Nice Guy tumbling off of it and crashing onto the floor before a big, firm chest moved between us, eclipsing the other man’s shame.

My eyes wandered up the chest to find the ruddy beard, cheerful smirk and bright green eyes of the man I’d watched at the poker table earlier. The one who’d been holding three sixes. He looked like he was in a good mood.

He must have won his hand.

“Yer a pretty lass, whoever ye are.” He straightened the lapels of his suit jacket, then offered me his hand. He spoke loud enough that I knew the blond could hear him. Intentionally, I wondered—or was he just one of those big men with no volume control? He must have been at least six-foot-five. He was built like he could have single-handedly erected Stonehenge. “How’s about ye let me take you out intae the alleyway, bend ye over and fuck ye ‘til you see St. Peter at the pearly gates?”

My cunt throbbed at the suggestion—boorish, but that accent was obviously doing something for me. Not that it mattered. My fingers curled into a fist, ready to clock him for that suggestion.

He’d done me a favor in getting rid of the blond, but I wasn’t the kind of woman who let men talk to me that way.

Even if they *did* have impressively thick beards, full lips and sparkling emerald eyes.

The only thing that stopped me from hitting him in the end was exactly that: his eyes.

He inclined his head toward the blond, who I could half-see trying to scramble off the floor and to his feet again. Then, he gave me a cheeky wink.

Ah.

Slowly, my lips curled into a smile as I placed my hand in his.

“Sounds like a good time, handsome.” As soon as my slender fingers brushed against his bigger ones, he captured my hand and gave it a tight squeeze. “That’s *exactly* what I need right now. I’m so glad you asked.”

“Couldnae help myself, truly.” He raised my hand to his lips. The bristles of his coppery beard and mustache tickled my knuckles as he

pressed a firm, playful kiss to the back of my palm. “He’s right. That is a *verrae* fine dress.”

I knew we were playing, but my pussy obviously didn’t. Another throb. God help me—if he kept this up and I wasn’t able to find my husband-to-be in the crowd tonight, I might actually take him up on that offer.

He looked like the kind of man who would make for an extremely interesting one-night stand.

“What the fuck? What the actual fuck?” The blond shouted after us as my new friend helped me off the bar stool and toward the exit. “That shit worked on you? What’s he got that I don’t?”

“A sense of equilibrium, for one,” I called back over my shoulder.

“Aye, and about six inches,” the redhead added. He looked down at me and gave me another wink. “That’s above the belt *and* below. Before ye ask.”

I snorted. An ugly laugh, but I didn’t care.

He was funny. He was tall—I barely came up to his shoulder, even in these heels. He had an accent that was quickly turning my lace panties into a brand-new Loch Ness—and he’d just helped me out of what could have been a very annoying situation.

Not that I’d needed it. But still.

“Thank you,” I said once we were away from the bar. “But you didn’t have to do that. I had it under control.”

“Aye. I’m sure ye did.” The redhead nodded sagely. “Ye look like the kind of lass who can handle herself.”

“Then why on earth did you step in?”

His gaze slipped down to meet mine. There was something deliciously hungry and wolfish about the way his greens were glimmering. “Dunno. Maybe I really do want tae bend ye over out into the alley and make ye scream my name. See how well ye handle yerself then.”

“And what name is it that I’d be screaming?” Even if we didn’t end up fucking—I hadn’t yet forgotten that I was still on the job tonight, after all—he seemed like the kind of man I wouldn’t mind knowing.

“Lock,” he said. Then, almost like an afterthought: “And yer own?”

“Joan Bouchard.” I knew I needed to let go of his hand soon. To get back to my husband-hunt. But his palm was pleasantly rough and callused against my own. Warm. The way my fingers fit into the spaces between his felt strangely...right. “Do you have surname, Lock?”

“Nah. Not many have those where I come from.”

“Surely they have surnames in Scotland.” I let out a small laugh. I couldn’t imagine what he meant. “Is your name short for Lachlan?”

“Tell ye what,” Lock said, bringing us to a stop at the casino doors. “Why don’t ye let me buy ye a drink—a proper one, not whatever watered down swill they were slinging back at that bar. Ye tell me what a lass like you was doing alone in a place like this tonight, and I’ll tell ye my full name.”

I cast a glance back at the casino floor. I still needed to track down my partner for the mission I was supposed to begin tonight. The Covenant wouldn’t be happy to learn I’d caused a delay.

But then again, if they’d wanted to ensure that I could find whatever idiot man they wanted me to marry tomorrow, they should have given me a physical description of him. Or, at the very least, a name. I’d assumed he would make himself known to me at some point, but I’d been walking around for hours to no avail already. When I glanced at my phone, I found no messages on it. The time told me that even for Las Vegas, it was getting pretty late.

From the looks of things, my future husband’s arrival had been delayed.

I glanced back up at Lock, who was still awaiting my answer. It took quite a bit for a man to impress me with his physicality alone. With nothing more than my fists, I’d made too many men’s skulls crack against the floor. But Lock certainly had a *presence*—and the charm to go with, too.

If I was really going to go through with this mission—if I was really going to actually get *married* to some stranger on the Covenant’s orders tomorrow—I didn’t see why I couldn’t make the most of my last night as an unwed woman.

“You’re on,” I agreed, giving him a wink of my own.

If my future husband—if I could even call a man I was marrying out for two weeks as the result of a business arrangement a *husband*—had a problem with that, he’d have to find some way to deal with it.

Maybe he should have been on time.

“YOU’RE NOT GOING to believe me if I tell you,” I informed Lock over twin glasses of whiskey at a dark, intimate little bar. “Everything I’m

about to say is going to sound like a lie.”

“Ye’ve got a lovely pair of lips, Joan,” Lock countered. “I’ve certainly been lied to from worse.”

I laughed, then took a breath.

If he was sure, then.

Telling him was probably some kind of breach of my contract—but again, I didn’t expect him to buy any of what I was about to say.

Even for me, sometimes it still felt a little too insane to be believed.

“So, a little over nine months ago, my friend Bea got married.” It was a clunky place to start a story, but technically speaking, it was the beginning. The point where my entire life had gone straight to Hell.

“I wish her congratulations, then.” Lock raised his whiskey. I mirrored his motion. “*Wi’tippeny, we fear nae evil. Wi’usquabae, we’ll face the devil. Slàinte Mhath!*”

I smirked as he tossed his whiskey back. His words gave me pause before I did the same.

His toast was from a poem I recognized. *Tam O’ Shanter* by Robert Burns.

He had no idea how appropriate it was.

“She married a demon,” I told him after waiting for him to swallow his drink down. Lock seemed like the kind of man who could handle surprise as well as he handled his booze and his poetry, but still. I didn’t want to accidentally cause a spit take.

“Did she now?” His cocked his head to the side and winced. “In that case, my condolences. S’pose many lasses do these days.”

“An *actual* demon,” I corrected him. “I’m not being hyperbolic.”

“Ooch. Aye.” Lock nodded like he understood, but the playfulness in his eyes told me otherwise. “And I’m an angel, fallen straight from Heaven.”

“I told you that you wouldn’t believe me.” I laughed and shook my head. “Anyway. Will you tell me your name now? Your real one. You *did* promise.”

“I did,” Lock agreed. “But ye havenae finished tellin’ me yer story, have ye?”

“If you’re just going to tease me about it, I don’t really see the point.”

Lock held his hands up in surrender. “All right, then. No more teasin’. But ye’ll have to be a bit more convincin’, if ye want me to believe that

you're not just takin' me for a ride."

I leaned back and looked Lock up and down.

Taking him for a ride was exactly what I was planning on doing, in fact—but if he wanted the truth before we fell into bed together, fine. He could have it.

It might even feel good, to finally tell someone what I'd *really* been up to all this time. I still didn't think he'd buy any of it, but that made it all the better. In a world full of so many secrets...it was kind of nice, knowing that I could safely confess to someone with no real skin in this game.

"Bea's husband's name is Abaddon. Don, for short. He's a King of Hell."

"Do ye think that counts as marryin' up, or marryin' down?"

I swatted at his arm. "You said no more teasing."

"I did, aye. My apologies, lass." Lock pressed his lips together and nodded like he was preparing himself to swallow down further disbelief. "So how's she finding that, then?"

"Pretty well, I think. They just had a baby." I wished my work hadn't kept me off the grid for so long. I hadn't even gotten a proper chance to catch her up on everything yet. Once this mission was over, I'd have to try to get the time off to go visit and explain. "Anyway. At the wedding reception, I was approached by a man from an organization called the Covenant."

"Ooch. Sounds eerie. One o' them spooky secret ones, is it?"

"Exactly." I swirled my whiskey around in my glass, then took a tiny sip. The taste was warm and rich. Honeyed. Golden. "He offered me a job, working for his people. It sounded like fun, so I took him up on it."

"And what is it ye do for these Covenant lads? Dancing naked in the moonlight? Summoning the Dark Lord Lucifer himself?"

"Oh, you know. This and that." I smiled, playing coy. I liked my work. It was a good job with good pay—and it was important. Probably the most important thing I'd ever do in all my life. "I travel the world for them. They send me to old, sacred places so I can break into ancient temples and secret tombs to find mystical artifacts. I secure whatever they're after and bring it back to them."

"Like *Indiana Jones*, aye?"

"Or *Tomb Raider*," I agreed. "It's a lot of fun."

“Doesnae exactly explain what yer doin’ in a place like Las Vegas, though,” Lock pointed out. “Everything here—well. It’s sacred if ye worship at the altar of Elvis impersonators and all-ye-can-eat buffets. Bit dated in parts, I s’pose. But hardly ancient.”

“The Covenant’s given me a new mission,” I explained. My words flowed from my lips even smoother than the whiskey he’d chosen for us. Lock was more than just handsome. When he wasn’t giving me shit, he was incredibly easy to talk to as well. “My biggest one yet.”

“I’m all ears, lass.”

I smirked. “They’ve hired me to pull a heist on Hell. To steal from the Devil himself.”

That wasn’t technically true, I supposed. From what little I’d gathered from my rare correspondences with the Covenant, the Devil had left Hell a while ago.

Now, as a result, the world was falling apart.

It was my job to help stop it.

I liked my job a lot.

“Stealin’ from the Devil.” Lock snorted. His eyes widened. He looked impressed. “That’s a tall order for such a wee lass. No offense meant.”

“None taken,” I assured him. He still didn’t believe me, but that was all right. Why would he? It was as insane out loud as it had been in the Covenant’s latest orders. Completely nuts. “I don’t mind being fun-sized. Makes it pretty funny when I knock big, burly men like you to the ground.”

I tossed back my whiskey and found Lock smiling at me as I lowered my glass once more.

“Is that what yer plannin’ on doin’ tonight?” His gaze trailed to the hem of my dress. He rolled his lower lip beneath his tongue. “Takin’ me down?”

“Maybe. I haven’t decided yet.” That was a lie. My pussy burned hot with keen, intense awareness of the way he was looking at my thighs. My heart fluttered a little every time he made a comment like that—*takin’ me down* indeed. Lock was rugged, handsome and slightly dangerous. Exactly my type. “But if I do, I’m afraid I don’t do encore performances.” I sighed, feeling a little wistful about that. If there was ever a man worth a two-night stand, it was Lock. And unfortunately, it wasn’t meant to be. “I have to get married tomorrow night.”

“Is that so?”

I met his eyes. “It is.”

“I see.” Lock quirked an eyebrow. “Who’s the lucky lad?”

“I’m not sure. Someone with power, certainly. A demon, I think. Must be.”

“A demon willing to steal from the Devil?” Lock scoffed. “Sounds like a right bastard to me.”

“Maybe so. But we’re supposed to work together on this job. The Covenant claims that marrying him—whoever he is—and fucking with him will help protect me while I’m in Hell.”

“Marriage *is* a sacred covenant,” Lock said, almost approvingly. He was only humoring me now, but I didn’t mind. Men had put up with a lot crazier stories from women in the hopes that they’d get laid by the end of them, and Lock seemed like a good sport. “That’s a lot tae ask for a gig economy job, though. Swiving a demon while on the clock...are ye nervous?”

I laughed. “A little. Interested too, though. Sex with a demon—you have to kind of wonder what that would even be like.”

“Awful lot of hellfire and brimstone, most like.” Lock clicked his tongue in the side of his cheek and cocked his head to the side. “I certainly wouldnae be up for it. Maybe ye’d be better off finding yerself a nice, normal man. Broad shoulders. Green eyes. Scottish, maybe. If ye were intae that kinda thing, ye ken.”

“I’m entertaining the idea,” I admitted with a smile. “I’m still single tonight.”

“So ye are. And how do ye feel about getting yerself hitched to a man ye don’t even know?”

“It doesn’t bother me,” I said with a shrug. “Marriage never struck me as something I’d ever take seriously anyway. And the work is important. If the Covenant says I need to marry this man to complete the job, I’m fine with that. Some things are worth jumping through a few hoops for.”

“And what sort of things would those be?”

The bartender arrived with two more whiskeys. I took my glass in hand and clinked it against Lock’s. “Saving the world, for one.”

“The whole world?” Lock’s voice raised slightly, like the notion amused him. “Saving it from what, exactly?”

“There’s a war brewing here on Earth.” Okay. I shouldn’t have been telling him any of this and I knew it. But he was sweet to have played along this far, and frankly, it was a relief to tell *someone*. I hadn’t been able to talk to my friends properly since Bea’s wedding. I didn’t have a mother or father to talk to. Come to think, this conversation with Lock was the longest one I’d had with another human in a long time. “The Covenant says the apocalypse is coming. If you watch the news—”

Lock chuckled. “Not if I can help it. Depressing stuff. That little civil war they had in Canada last year? All those missile tests over Hawaii?”

“Peace in the Middle East and the Sahara in full bloom,” I added. “It’s not all depressing, if you’re willing to look. But I know what you mean. It’s all supposed to be signs of the end times. That’s why the Covenant is gathering up all these artifacts. When Heaven and Hell break loose here on Earth, they don’t trust the angels and demons to have humanity’s backs.”

“And ye trust the Covenant?” Lock took a sip of his whiskey. “Shady organizations like that can have ulterior motives too, no?”

“They haven’t given me any reason to doubt them.” Briefly, I frowned. Except for that night at Bea’s wedding reception, I hadn’t been in direct contact with any of my employers. All our correspondences were sent over secure email servers from disposable addresses and burner phones like the one I had resting on the bar next to my glass right now. They hadn’t exactly given me much opportunity to ask questions.

Lock had a good point.

Maybe a little too good.

“Well, what do they have ye stealing from Hell, then?” he asked.

“I’m not sure yet.” Even if I had been, I wasn’t certain that I would have told him. His complete lack of disbelief had felt like a godsend at first. Someone I could spill my guts to who wouldn’t call me crazy for any of the perfectly insane things that I said.

Now, though...it felt like the mood had changed.

Something here was wrong. I had no idea why. But now that we were deeper into this conversation, Lock’s responses seemed a lot less like innocent flirtation and a lot more like those of someone who knew *exactly* what I was talking about.

Fuck.

I’d said too much from the start, and he’d been all too happy to milk me for more.

Idiot!

“Well, I hope this mission of yers goes well for ye, Joanie.” Lock’s voice was quiet and gentle. At the sound of my name—*Joanie*—the skin on my arms turned to gooseflesh. I didn’t know why. “Hope this husband o’ yers is kind to ye, too.”

“I mean, marrying a demon...” I laughed, playing things cool. I was definitely going home with Lock tonight, I’d already decided. But not for the reason I’d initially thought. I needed to get this guy somewhere private and quiet. I needed to take him down—and not in the more fun sense of that phrase. I needed to figure out exactly who he was and what, if anything, he was planning on doing with all the information I’d just stupidly spilled. “He’s probably some arrogant asshole, right? Someone who only thinks of himself.” I reached out and ran my hand up Lock’s arm. I gave him my best bedroom eyes. “Not like you.”

Lock glanced down to my hand on his arm. “And what do ye know about me?”

“You’re handsome. Kind. Maybe a little bit of a hero complex—not that I mind.” I kept working my fingertips up the fabric of his shirt. His biceps were huge. Warrior’s arms. It would be nice to be held in them. Even nicer once I was sure that he wasn’t going try to do anything with them that I’d have to make him regret. “What do you think about finding that alleyway you were talking about earlier, Lock?”

“Mm. Aye. Might be nice.” Lock shifted a little closer to me. He took my chin between his fingers and turned my face up toward his. My chest went tight in an instant. My pussy was throbbing again, with an almost panicked intensity this time. *Fuck*. “But ye havenae given me a chance to hold up my end of our bargain yet, have ye?”

“Oh. Your name.” I licked my lips, shifting closer as well. I’d make out with him for a little while before I set about shoving him up against a wall and figuring out exactly why he’d been so open to believing everything I’d told him, I decided then and there. I wanted to feel those handsome lips of his against mine before I had to introduce them to my fist. “Of course. What is it?”

Lock leaned in further, until the bristles of his beard were tickling against my ear.

“Moloch,” he purred. My heart froze in my chest in an instant. “King of Hell.”

“You’re—”

I tried to pull away, but Lock’s hold on my chin was firm.

“Aye,” he said. “I’m yer man. That arrogant arsehole yer meant to be marrying. The one who only thinks of himself.” He pulled back so I could see him smirk. “No a demon, though. Ye got that part wrong.”

Fucker. He’d played me. All this time, he’d known exactly who I was—and I hadn’t had the slightest clue about him.

“Then what are you?” Anger smoldered and simmered in my chest. I didn’t care what he was—most importantly, I knew he was a bastard.

As Lock chuckled, I clenched my jaw tight.

“Like I told ye, mo leannan. I’m a fallen angel,” he said. “And a wee disappointed in ye, too. Shouldnae go around tellin’ yer secrets so willingly.”

He dropped my chin, leaned back, and drank the rest of his whiskey. My second drink was still mostly untouched.

I’d spilled everything to him, and he didn’t even have to get me drunk to do it.

“On account of, ye ken,” Lock continued, still smirking. “Ye never know who ye might really be talkin’ to, aye?”

I decided then and there that I hated my husband-to-be.

Moloch. Fallen angel. King of Hell. He’d used me, teased me, made a fool of me.

And he’d looked far too good doing it, too.

LOCK

“Come on now, lass,” I cooed down to Joan as I led her through the entrance of the Inferno on my arm. The first level was Limbo, a cafe-bar where dead writers and poets liked to sit and drink and scribble, even in the wee hours of the night. Time didn’t matter so much when you were already in Hell, I supposed. “Ye could at least try and look like ye like me. If we’re meant tae be wed, and all.”

“I don’t like you,” Joan said with a scowl. She was still pretty as a picture in that tight little dress of hers. Made her tits look fantastic. Emphasized how delicate her collarbones were, how small her waist. But her expression—it was that of a kitten I might’ve just pulled out of a particularly deep mud puddle. Dour and wet. You would’ve thought I was bringing her into Hell by the scruff of her neck. “You’re a liar, and a scoundrel, and a...a...” She searched for the word, found it and spat it at me. “A *rascal*.”

“A *rascal*, am I?” My shoulders shook with laughter. “Gracious me. Havenae heard that one in a good while.”

“Well, you’re about to hear it frequently. That, and worse.”

I reached over to pat the hand she currently had curled around my arm. “Then I eagerly await hearing ye exhaust yer full vocabulary of insults, lass. Now—c’mon.” I pressed the button for the elevator and gave her a grin. “Our chamber awaits.”

“THERE’S ONLY ONE BED.” Joan blinked at the aforementioned *one* bed like its mere existence perplexed her somehow.

“Ah, well...that’s by design, no?” I glanced at her purse, realizing for the first time exactly how light she traveled. That wee black bag of hers couldn’t have held more than a tube of lipstick, a passport and a cellphone. “Did ye send the rest of yer things ahead? I can call down for Charon to bring them up.”

“Charon? Like—”

“In the myths, aye. Oarsman of the underworld.” And not a bad manservant, neither. Joanie would like him—she had last time she was here, at least.

“I don’t have any other things,” said Joan. “The Covenant had this outfit stashed away for me at the airport when I flew in from Easter Island this afternoon. I ditched my old clothes in the bathroom trash before I grabbed a cab.” Joan’s focus was still on the plush mattress and ample pillows in front of us. The bedspread was golden. The sheets, red silk. A box of chocolates rested at the foot of it. Looked all right to me. “Lock, there’s only one bed.”

“Aye, so ye said.” I sat down next to the box of chocolates and moved them aside. “We’ll need tae get ye a fresh kit before morning, then. I can have some nightclothes sent up too—unless yer partial to sleeping in that dress.”

My gaze prowled up and down her body again. Made my cock twitch just looking at her. My pulse was at a trot just for having her this close.

For so long now, I’d been searching for her. For even longer, I’d been missing having those tight, perfect curves sleeping next to me at night. She looked even better than I remembered. Her arms, firmer. Her thighs, even more irresistible than they’d been in my dreams. She made it hard to keep my eyes off of her. It was a wonder I was even managing to keep my hands to myself.

“Why would I sleep in this?” Joan gestured to her dress with a scowl. “Does it look comfortable to you?”

I fucking wanted her. Every cell in my body was screaming at me to take it off her. Tear it to shreds. It was a pretty dress, aye, but as she’d said, it didn’t look particularly cozy.

Sounded like I’d be doing us both a favor if I took it between my hands and ripped it apart.

"I certainly wouldnae want to wear it to bed, no," I agreed. My lips curled into a wolfish grin. "Are ye planning on sleeping in the nude, then?"

Almighty help me if she said yes.

"Lock, there's *only one bed*," Joan said again, more forcefully this time.

"Ye keep sayin' that, lass, but I dunno what ye mean by it." I arched a brow. "Yer marryin' me on the morrow. Yer cover here in the Inferno is bein' my wife. I dinnae ken exactly how things are bein' done on Earth these days, mind, but last I checked, husbands and wives usually sleep together. No?"

"I'm not sharing a bed with you." Joan crossed her arms over her ribs and shook her head firmly. "That wasn't part of the deal."

"So ye'll marry a man, fuck him, steal from his kingdom—"

"You're supposed to be *helping* me steal from your kingdom," Joan pointed out. A fair point.

Mine was fairer.

"—but ye won't share a bed with him?" I scoffed and reached for the box of chocolates. "Doesnae make much sense to me."

"I'm willing to do whatever it takes to complete my mission." Joan shrugged, staring me down with eyes of black ice. "I don't see how sharing a bed is necessary for that."

"Well..." I plucked at the bow of the chocolate box to untie it and set the ribbon aside. "Tae maintain yer cover, y'see, we've got tae share the room. And the room, as ye've pointed out so keenly, has only got the one bed in it." I opened the box of chocolates up and pulled a truffle out, offering it to her. "Chocolate?"

"No thank you." Joan glared at the chocolate like it had just called her ma a rude name, then pointed to the loveseat across the room. "I'll take the bed. You can sleep there."

I eyed up the loveseat, then let out a bark of a laugh. "About half of me might fit there, mo leannan. Where's the other half meant to sleep?"

"On the floor," Joan suggested, walking toward me. "Or in the bathtub. I can hack off a few limbs, if it would make you more comfortable. But here? In this bed? With me?" She sat down next to me and placed her hands on my shoulders, apparently intending to banish me from the mattress by force. Her touch was a blessing. Almost as good as when she'd

been stroking up my arm back in that bar, making bedroom eyes. When she shoved, she gritted her teeth and pushed with all her might. “Absolutely...not!”

It was a bit like watching a border collie try to herd a train. Like a river trying to erode stone. If she kept at it long enough, there’d eventually be a turn in the tracks, a little give. I couldn’t exactly sit there on the bed forever, now could I?

But I had a feeling she was going to tire out before I did.

When she finally gave up, it was with a frustrated huff.

“What?” she said. “Is the King of Hell too high and mighty to sleep on a lowly couch for a few weeks? Is that what this is about?”

“I’ve slept on worse.” I leaned in, brushing the highest point of her cheekbone with the tip of my nose. “Maybe I just like the idea of havin’ yer pretty wee body next to mine all night. Maybe ye’ll like it too, if ye give it a go.”

Joan stiffened for a moment, then pulled away. “You’re being a dick, Lock.”

“Am no.” I leaned away as well, furrowing my brow at her, and pressed the chocolate to her mouth. She kept her lips shut tight, though. Her pride was apparently still stinging from the wound I’d given it back at the bar. Momentarily defeated, I lowered the chocolate. “Look. It’s a perfectly good bed, lass. No reason to waste it. And if the maids come in to tidy up, only to find a King of Hell sleepin’ in a fuckin’ bathtub—”

“A King of Hell? Not *the* King of Hell?”

“One of three, aye.” I nodded. “Or, one of two now, I s’pose, now that Don’s gone and hidden himself away with yer friend Bea and their wee bairn—”

“You...know Don and Bea?” Joan blinked in surprise. She turned her body toward mine, suddenly interested. “My Bea?”

“Aye. Verrae well, actually. Wee Abbie too—though, not as well as I’d like.” *On account of the fact I’ve spent the last nine months chasing your pretty arse around the world trying to catch up to you again*, I stopped myself from adding. Wasn’t the right time.

“That’s...” Joan frowned, staring down at the floor for a moment with her hands on her knees. “I didn’t realize you were friends with them. You could have saved me a lot of...annoyance. You should’ve said something.”

“Just did, didn’t I?”

“Earlier, I mean. Instead of fucking me around like that when we met.” She raised her eyes to meet mine. “I don’t like being lied to, Lock.”

“No. Don’t s’pose anyone does. But I see yer point.” I offered her the chocolate again, holding it out at chin height this time. “I’m sorry, for what it’s worth. It was a dirty trick. Ye were just bein’ so damn charming, makin’ eyes and movin’ yer mouth the way ye do...”

Joan glanced down at the chocolate. “I was moving my mouth because I was spilling all my secrets to you, Lock. That’s what humans do when people say things—move their mouths.”

“Aye, but the way ye do it is, ah...particularly enticing.” I smiled at her and nudged the chocolate her way. It was beginning to melt on my fingertips. If she made me hold onto it any longer, it was going to start dripping onto the bed. “S’pose I couldnae help myself.”

“No, I suppose you couldn’t.” Almost shyly, Joan lowered her lips to my fingers. Then—so positively sinful my cock went hard in an instant—she wrapped her lips around the truffle and sucked it into her mouth.

I watched her eyes close as she chewed it. A small moan left her mouth. At the sound of it, my mouth went wet and my slacks got tighter across my lap.

God, how I’d missed those little sounds of pleasure she made. Every one of them perfect. Every one unique.

“You’re staring, Lock,” Joan said as she opened her eyes again.

“Yer easy tae stare at.” I sucked my thumb into my mouth, licking away the melted chocolate. Would have rather been sucking on her clit instead, of course—but later, hopefully. If we were really fated, it would all happen soon enough. “What? Am I no allowed?”

“If you’re really friends with Don, why are you betraying him?” Joan asked, staring right back at me. Her dark eyes glinted with seriousness. That moment of softness I’d just witnessed had disappeared as quickly as the chocolate had. She’d used the chocolate as a buffer, I realized. A pause in the conversation to start poking holes in what I’d said. “Betraying your own kingdom, for that matter?”

“If yer friends with Don, you’re *betraying* him just the same,” I pointed out.

The truth, of course, was that neither of us was betraying him at all. She just hadn’t figured it out yet.

“I like Don. Bea loves him, so I have no reason not to. It’s not about him,” Joan said with conviction. “I don’t have anything personal against Hell, either. I just don’t trust a bunch of demons to keep humanity’s best interests in mind when shit starts to go down on Earth.”

“And ye don’t think I might have the same motivations?”

“If you did, then we wouldn’t have to be pulling this heist to begin with.” Joan held out her hand, palm up. “Why don’t you just give me whatever we came here to fetch? We can skip the wedding, the heist—all of it. Then I’ll be out of your bed, out of your hair and on my merry way.”

“Maybe I like ye in my bed.”

“I’m sure you do.” Joan didn’t back down. “Answer my question, Lock.”

“S’pose whatever it is that the Covenant wants isnae something that I can just go and grab.” I shrugged. “I’m working with yer people because they’ll give us the tools to get the thing they’re after. But when we do, truth be told, I’m no plannin’ on givin’ it to them anyway.”

Joan’s mouth fell slightly open. “You’re telling me—”

“I’m going to double-cross yer employers, aye. They’re no good people, Joan. Certainly not after what’s best for humanity. Once yer able tae see that, everything else is going tae start making a lot more sense.”

She moved fast. Faster than I’d expected. Joan didn’t have anything on me when it came to size or strength, but when she snapped into action, she was surprisingly good at throwing her weight around.

She hooked a knee over my hip, placing one hand on my shoulder and then wrapping the other around my throat. With everything she had, she shoved my torso down onto the mattress and leaned over me. Her dark hair, chin length, fell down around her face, framing it with a halo of black.

“Give me one good reason why I should trust you now.” She growled the words down at me through her teeth. “Now that I know what you’re really up to.”

“S’pose ye don’t have any.” I stared back up at her, enjoying the flickers of fire working through the blacks of her eyes. “But ye have no reason to trust the Covenant either, do ye? Told me that much yerself.”

“The Covenant is trying to save the world.” She tightened her grip around my throat. Scowled and shifted her hips upward when she felt what that did to my cock in return. “You’re a lying, cheating demon.”

“No a demon,” I corrected her. “Fallen angel. Different kind of thing.”

“Is it really?” Joan didn’t sound convinced. “You’re all creatures of Hell, aren’t you?”

“Aye, but I could get my angel wings back someday, if I wanted. Heaven allowing. Stronger powers too, for that matter.” I reached up and tucked her hair behind her ear. “Is that no the reason you’re planning on marrying and fucking me, after all?”

“I’m not marrying you *or* fucking you.” She shook her head and I lowered my hand. “Not now. I don’t *trust* you, Lock.”

“That’s a shame. Seein’ as I’m the only one here in Hell ye *should* trust.”

“How can I? You’ve just told me point blank that you’re planning on undoing everything that I’ve been working for.” Her scowl darkened. “In fact, I can’t think of one good reason why I shouldn’t call up the Covenant and out your little scheme to them right now.”

“Before ye go blowin’ my cover, ye might want to take the time to investigate yer options a little better,” I suggested. “Call Bea. Talk tae her about me. Check yer sources and the like. If yer right, and I’m lyin’, then, sure. Ye can run to your buddies at the Covenant to tell them the mission’s off. No skin off your back. Whatever they’re after here in Hell, they’ll find some other way.”

“And if I’m wrong...” She shrugged, nonchalant. “There are other demons in Hell, surely. Even if you *are* friends with Don and Bea, you’ve lied to me once already. As far as I’m concerned, you’re not my problem.”

“If yer wrong, ye’ll have eliminated yer only ally here in the Inferno,” I corrected her. “Hell is dangerous place to be without friends, Joan.”

She scoffed. “Is that what we are now, then? *Friends*?”

I stared at her for a long moment, my body bristling with the desire to prove exactly what kind of *friends* we were.

It wouldn’t have been hard. I could’ve taken her jaw in my hand, pulled her lips down to mine. Kissed her. Shown her every memory of our intertwined lives from before. Back when she’d loved me. Back when she’d told me every thought that crossed her pretty head.

Back when I’d been the kind of man that was easy for a woman like her to love. Before I’d lost her. Failed to protect her. Let angels take hold of her mind and erase me from it so they could carry her away.

I'd done my best to put myself back together since that night, but it wasn't proving to be an easy thing.

I was a warrior. Always had been. Always would be. But losing her had broken me in ways that no bloody battle or seemingly endless war ever had.

"I think once ye've had a chance to assess this situation, we're going to be a sight more than just *friends*, lass." I took her hand in mine and she sat back on my lap. Let me hold onto her pretty fingers. She even let me bring her hand all the way up to my lips so I could bite into the side of her palm, just beneath her thumb.

The same way I'd done every morning once upon a time, all those years ago before the universe had fallen apart.

Joan closed her eyes and drew in a deep breath at that gentle nip of my teeth. After a moment, she clenched them shut even tighter.

"How did you know to do that?" Her eyes opened slowly. Like she was just waking up from a long, fitful sleep.

"Do what?" I pressed my lips to the place where I'd just bitten. Tenderly, my tongue darted out to flick against her skin.

"*That*," Joan said. "I...I don't like it."

I looked her up and down, then cocked my head to the side. "No? Ye look ye do."

Her breasts were rising and falling against the tight bodice of her dress like she was breathing deeper than normal. Her shoulders were tense. Her knees clenched tight against my hips like she was desperately trying to keep from spreading them further.

Fuck, she was gorgeous.

Fuck—she was mine.

"It's something that happens in my dreams sometimes." She turned her face away from me. "Doesn't matter, though. Don't do it again."

Ah. So her memories of me were gone, but she still dreamed of me anyway.

Good.

I dreamed of her, too.

"And what else happens in these dreams?" I asked. Couldn't help myself. My hand moved to her thigh, caressing from her knee up to the hem of her dress. I gritted my teeth as I felt my instincts daring me to throw her down onto the mattress. To force her thighs apart so I could kiss

between them. Find all other places I knew I liked to bite. “Something nice, I hope.”

“You know what?” Joan let out a low sound of frustration as she shook my touch away and scrambled back off the bed. “If you’re going to be such a jackass about this, then have it your way. I’m going to go take a shower, then *I’ll* sleep on the couch.”

“No, ye won’t.” I closed my eyes and shook my head. Eventually, she was going to have to stop fighting me. She’d burn through her stubbornness far quicker than I’d burn through mine, and there was no point in it. We had more important people to fight than each other now. The Covenant was the least of them. “Like I said. If housekeeping comes in, they’ll be just as surprised to see you sleeping on the couch as they would me. If we’re going to pull one over on Hell, we need to play our part. Both of us. Agreed?”

She stared me down for a long, tense moment, then deflated.

“Fine. Then at least find me some pajamas while I shower,” she asked, hugging herself. That dress was beginning to look more uncomfortable with every passing minute. I’d be glad when she could finally get out of it.

For various reasons, of course.

“If ye really feel like ye need them,” I said with a smile. “But it might be more fun to just sleep in the nude, don’t ye think? Get to know each other a little better. Build up some of that trust.”

I winked at her and she groaned, rolling her eyes.

“Pajamas, Lock,” she said, crossing to the bathroom. “Or else I’ll make you sleep out in the hall.”

My grin widened as I kicked my boots off and shifted back in the bed.

My Joan. My fate. My entire soul.

Even if she didn’t know it yet, she was.

I chuckled as I lay back on the bed we’d be sharing tonight, then reached for the phone to order up something for her to wear for the occasion.

Make me sleep out in the hall.

I’d like to see her try.

JOAN

I woke up the next morning to find the tip of my nose so cold, for a moment I was sure that Hell had frozen over in the night while I slept.

That didn't make any sense, though.

The rest of my body was perfectly, deliciously warm.

I pulled the blanket up over my nose and clenched my eyes shut even tighter. I usually woke up early enough the first time around that if I tried, I could drift back off and grab another half hour or so without having to worry.

The warmth of the bed around me was far too tempting to deny it now.

Just a little while longer. One more short, gentle dream. Then, I'd hunt down coffee, do my best to remember what country I was in, and start in on doing whatever needed to be done.

As I snuggled deeper into the warmth, there was just one small thing that stopped me.

Well.

Okay.

Maybe not so small.

My eyes snapped open as I felt my ass press up against something firm and quite large.

What on earth...

My mind raced for a moment before it all clicked together.

The Covenant. My mission. The Inferno.

Lock.

Stock and barrels too, if I had to guess at what was currently poking me between my ass cheeks.

Fuck.

“Whit’s fur ye’ll no go by ye,” he mumbled sleepily in a ragged growl. “Thig crìoch air an t-saoghal...ach mairidh gaol is...ceòl.”

His body moved too, like it was answering to mine. The pocket of warmth that the heat coming up off his skin had created quickly enveloped me even further as he threw an arm over me and rolled his hips closer.

He moved his cock up and down against my ass, grinding into me. I drew a sharp breath and held it in.

It was absolutely unfair that something so wrong could feel so good.

“Lock?” I said—far more quietly than I should have. If I’d actually wanted him to stop, I would have shoved him off me and shouted until he stirred.

But instead, my voice was barely a whisper.

It felt so right, I didn’t want him to stop.

It had been a long time since I’d been with anyone like this. The irregularities of my work and a general distaste for most of the men I met had prevented me from forming the kind of connections I knew I preferred to have with a man before I was comfortable sleeping with him.

The last time I’d even so much as bothered with a one-night stand had been... God. College, probably. It felt like there were gaps in my memory that made even bad undergrad sex difficult to recall.

Probably the long-term effects of too much black coffee and oversteeped tea.

Last night, before I’d known that Lock was really Lock, was the closest I’d gotten to actually fucking someone in what felt like a small eternity.

And in spite of everything else that had happened after...

Asleep and mumbling like this, Lock wasn’t quite so dangerous for me to be around right now. Even if he was rock-hard against my ass.

Even better, he still looked and felt just like...well. Like Lock.

I shouldn’t have, but it was hard to resist. He was warm. He smelled like fresh rain and sweet clover, with just a hint of passing thunderstorm. His cock felt *good* there, gently rocking against me as he pushed up the hem of the thin nightgown he’d provided me with to sleep in.

My head was still having a hard time wrapping itself around our situation, but my body was a difficult thing to deny.

I *wanted* to be there, wrapped up in the heat and safety of arms as thick as his. I wanted to be small and sleepy and delicate for a little while, clutched against the body of the man who, later tonight, would make me his bride.

It wouldn't last. In my line of work, being delicate wasn't a thing I could often afford.

But for just a little while...

I let myself have it.

I cuddled back. Just a little.

As soon as I did, Lock's arm tightened around me and pulled me against him, nice and tight.

It was annoying, how incredible that felt. His chest was firm against my shoulders. His body felt impossibly huge, a vast, hot thing that could provide me with shelter through even the most unpredictable of storms.

"That feels good," I whispered. Not to him, but to myself.

It was perfect.

It was maddening.

After so many years of pushing men away, I'd admittedly almost been excited about this whole *sex with a demon* thing that was supposed to happen later tonight.

The Covenant had informed me that marrying my partner for this mission—plus sealing the deal by fucking him—would grant me powers and protections. Abilities potent enough that even a human like me wouldn't be defenseless against the demons of Hell.

It was strange to find myself feeling defenseless against the only demon I'd met so far. My future husband. A fallen angel.

A King of Hell himself.

The exact same man who was supposed to fuck me so I could be protected from creatures like him.

It would have been nice to be able to have Lock on such simple terms—but all of that had been undone from the start.

He wanted me to work with him against the Covenant. He said the work they were doing wasn't honest, let alone good.

Maybe he was telling the truth.

Maybe it was just a clever lie.

I hated not knowing who to trust.

But while I was enjoying the comforts of Lock's body—and despising not knowing what to make of Lock himself yet—Lock's hands seemed to have a mind of their own.

The arm he held me against him with shifted again. His hand cupped my breast through the nightgown, then squeezed it possessively. I couldn't help but gasp and arch in return.

That, too, felt good.

Far too good.

"You know," I whispered, "I might not trust you yet, Lock. But if Bea can vouch for you—if we're really going up against the Covenant together—" Fat chance, but for the moment, I was letting myself imagine what that would feel like. Me and a fallen angel, fighting the forces of evil together. If stranger things had happened, they weren't many. "Maybe it wouldn't be so bad, marrying you." I hesitated for a moment, then even more quietly, added what I really meant: "Fucking you."

Carefully, I moved my hips in time with his. The motion was gentle, a shifting of mere inches, but thrilling nonetheless.

A small fire was burning inside my core. As it consumed more and more of my body, its spread only quickened. My breaths came deeper. My chest felt heavy and light, all at once. Held in his arms like this, I could imagine all too easily what it would actually be like to take him. To have him inside me.

To be his.

My cunt throbbed. All the heat from the flames in my body was focusing between my thighs. I could feel myself getting wet for him. The fantasy of being with him coupled with the physicality of actually being this close—it was tantalizing. Delicious.

So was the low, dark purr of his brogue.

"Mo ghràdh. Mo chridhe." Lock mumbled more sleepy words I didn't know—then, finally a set that I recognized. "Mo leannan."

Mo leannan. Something he'd called me several times already. A term of endearment, or so I'd assumed the first time he'd done it. Maybe a patronizing one.

Then again...maybe not.

As Lock's hand descended from my breast down my body, I had a good idea of where it was headed.

I knew that if I let it reach its destination, I wouldn't be able to tell myself no.

"Lock!" I snapped, shoving him off me. I rolled to the edge of the bed, tugging the hem of my nightgown down as far as it would go. "What do you think you're doing?"

"Mm?" Lock looked down at his hand, then his gaze wandered to my chest. I glanced down and realized I'd tugged the nightie just a little too much. Now, my tits were practically popping out. *Great.* "Ah, well... s'pose I was getting handsy, wasn't I? Was that no what ye wanted, all cuddled up on me like that?"

"No," I said firmly. Lying through my teeth all the while. "That was *not* what I wanted. Not at all."

He chuckled, then shrugged apologetically.

"Well, if ye hated it so much, ye should've said something. I only kept it up because I reckoned ye were enjoying yerself."

"And why would you believe a thing like that?" Lock had been sleeping, hadn't he? Touching me out of some kind of basal masculine instinct.

Probably as a result of all the other women he normally had in his bed. I'd known men like him before. I recognized his type. Handsome face, hot body, easy charms—he probably had a different woman in his arms every night.

"Just thought if ye weren't enjoyin' yerself, it was mighty strange for ye to lay there awake for so long before ye finally got up."

My mouth fell open.

Fuck.

He hadn't been asleep at all.

"How long were you awake for?" I demanded, my cheeks burning pink.

"Ach, well. Long enough." Lock rubbed his eyes with the back of one massive hand and shifted into a sitting position. A grin curled on his lips as he peeked out from beneath his hand at me. "Dinnae worry though, lass. I thought it felt nice too. At least 'til ye made me stop."

"I was just...cold." I hugged myself against the enduring chill of the room, which was so much worse now without the heat of Lock's body against mine. "I thought it was supposed to be hot in Hell."

"I turned the heat down," Lock said with a shrug. "Dinnae want ye to get too warm in bed with me. I ken how hot my blood runs."

“Did you have to make it *freezing* in here, though?”

Lock chuckled. “Well, no. But how else was I gonna get ye to cuddle me so close?”

“You’re...you’re *despicable*,” I sputtered at him. I edged off the bed, putting more distance between us. The floor was cold against my bare feet. Even though my skin was still hot from blushing, the air was chilly outside of the warmth of Lock’s aura. I wrapped my arms around myself and tried not to shiver. “That’s the second time you’ve tricked me, Lock. You sure do have an interesting way of trying to earn a woman’s trust.”

“Maybe,” Lock allowed. “Or maybe I just like how ye look when yer flustered. Dunno if anyone’s ever told ye this, Joanie, but ye’ve got a pretty blush.”

That only made my cheeks burn hotter.

How kind of him to notice. But it was better for his eyes to be on my cheeks than on my tits, I supposed. I wrapped myself up in my arms even tighter, concealing my breasts from him as best I could. The low temperature had left my nipples stiff and a little sore.

The last thing I needed right now was for Lock to go thinking that meant I was somehow...*aroused* by his antics.

Even if, just a little bit, I actually was.

“WHAT’S the plan for today, then?” I changed the subject quickly. The less we lingered on what had just happened, the quicker I could regain my composure. “I hope you’re not just planning on messing with me all day.”

“As fun as that would be...no, unfortunately. I’ve some business to attend to. S’no fun bein’ king, but I’ve been away from Hell for a while. Need to keep up appearances. Take care of a few bits and pieces of royal duties here and there.” He grinned. “Then, when we’re done...s’pose we have a wedding to attend, do we no?”

Ah, yes. *Our* wedding.

How could I forget?

“And what am I supposed to do while you’re *taking care of business*?” If he was still acting as King of Hell, it didn’t bode well for his story about being prepared to betray it. If he was king, shouldn’t he have been capable of calling the shots? Stopping the armies of Hell from marching on Earth himself? “I came here to work, Lock. Not sit in your royal suite with my thumb up my ass while you go attend to your other job.”

Lock arched an eyebrow with sudden interest. “Would ye prefer my thumb instead? I’m sure I could move my schedule around a bit, if so.”

I glared at him. “Be serious. We should be going over the blueprints of this place. Getting to know our exits. Getting to know *each other*.”

“And ye don’t think having my thumb up yer arse might help a bit with that?”

“No, frankly. I don’t.” I moved to the couch, grabbed one of the throw pillows, and tossed it at him.

Lock laughed as he swatted it away with ease, sending it soaring across the room and onto the floor.

“Yer Covenant hasnae even told us what they’re wantin’ us to steal yet. Ought to wait until they drop us more intel to start figuring out our next steps. We’d just be burning through energy otherwise. Besides.” Lock leaned back against the bed’s headboard, his gaze prowling over me once more. “Ye’ve gotta get ready for the big ceremony tonight, don’t ye? Here comes the bride and all.”

“Big ceremony?” I almost laughed. “My understanding was that we were going to a twenty-four-hour chapel. Hardly worth spending all day getting ready over.”

“Aye,” Lock said with a sage nod. “But frankly, lass, I dinnae care. It’s yer first wedding, so—”

“And how would you possibly know that?” Unless the Covenant had told him? Unfair, if so. Lock was planning on double-crossing them. I trusted them as completely as I could, circumstances being what they were.

If they’d told him everything about me while telling me nothing at all about him...

Well. That was suspicious, at least. What was to be gained by keeping me in the dark?

Lock only smiled, though. “I didn’t. Just a guess. But ye just told me so yerself.”

“Oh.” *Dammit*. I’d given myself away again.

Lock had an exceptional knack for finding me out.

“Anyways. As we’ve just confirmed, this is yer first go at bein’ married. I wanna make it nice for ye. So, aye. Ye’ll spend yer day gettin’ primped and pampered. Ye dinnae need to fight me on that. I’ve already arranged it all.”

“This is all fake, though,” I reminded him. Why did it matter to him so much? It certainly didn’t to me. “We’ll be divorced as soon as it’s done.”

Lock inclined his head to the side, smirking. “And I dinnae care. Either we do this as properly as we can, time allowin’, or we don’t do this at all.”

I sighed. Lock’s smirk might have been playful, but the tone of his voice told me he wasn’t going to back down on this notion of his.

If he said I was going to spend the day being fawned over in preparation for our nuptials...

That was probably just the way things were going to be.

“In that case, I hope you’ve arranged for additional clothing for me.” I gestured down to the nightie, which felt smaller and more revealing every time I remembered I had it on. “I’m not going anywhere dressed like this.”

“Not wi’out me with ye, ye aren’t,” Lock agreed firmly. “That’d get ye in a world of trouble here in the Inferno, lookin’ like ye do. But there’s a robe on the bathroom door for ye.” Lock nodded me in the right direction, as if I’d somehow forgotten where the bathroom was in the vast expanse of our little suite. “Slippers on the counter. Housekeeping brought them for ye up while ye slept. Ye can wear them up to Vexations on the fifth floor. I’ll take ye there myself.”

Tentatively, I approached the door. The robe was white and plush. When I ran my fingers over it, I almost sighed.

I didn’t make bad money working for the Covenant, but a lot of that went to paying off my student loans. Before that, I’d been an academic and a bartender. Not exactly the most lucrative of career paths.

And before that still, I’d been a silly, scared little girl carted from foster home to foster home without a penny to my name.

This robe was nicer than anything I’d ever owned.

“Lock...” I said to him, turning with the robe in my hands. It was so soft, I wasn’t sure why anyone ever wore anything else.

“Aye?”

Thank you for this, I wanted to say. But that was stupid. And sentimental. And dumb.

And embarrassing, to boot.

“Whit’s fur ye’ll no go by ye.” I tried to summon his words from memory, changing the subject. Probably butchered them a little—but from the look on Lock’s face, I’d managed them well enough. “What does that mean?”

“Huh? Where’d ye here a thing like that, lass?” Lock rubbed a hand through his messy, ruddy hair. He only succeeded in making it even messier.

“You were mumbling it in your sleep.” Or, what I’d assumed to be sleep. I couldn’t quite tell exactly when he’d woken up.

“Was I?” Lock’s eyebrows raised in surprise, then lowered in something else. An expression I couldn’t entirely place. “Ach, fuck’s sake. And is that *all* I was mumbling in my sleep?”

“No,” I admitted. “Something else. Ah... ‘Heeg cree-air erin tearl ach...married girl is...kale?’”

Lock blinked at me twice, then let out a soft chuckle.

“Thig crìoch air an t-saoghal ach mairidh gaol is ceòl,” he repeated back at me. The difference between his words and my own was faint, but present. “Means...ah. It’s an old Gaelic sayin’. Pretty one. *The world will end, but love and music won’t.* More or less.”

Huh. That was...kind of sweet, I guessed.

A little terrifying to think about with the actual apocalypse knocking on Earth’s door, but if love and music were all that would survive it...

Add in a few puppies and kittens and chubby babies, and I supposed there were worse things to save.

“And the other part?” I asked.

“Whit’s fur ye’ll no go by ye?” Again, Lock laughed. “Hmm. Have ye ever listened to Doris Day, Joanie?”

“Maybe?” I didn’t know what Lock would have been muttering about Doris Day in his sleep for—especially not in conjunction with the end of the world. “I can’t remember.”

“Bet ye have.” Lock rose from the bed, clad only in a pair of short black boxer briefs. “The song’s a classic.”

My eyes swept over him with hungry interest. His thighs were thickly muscled and curled with red-gold hair. His chest was broad and covered with those same muscles, that same hair.

His arms reminded me of the branches of a tree at one of the foster homes I’d been placed at. An old white farmhouse out in the middle of nowhere with an ancient cherry tree out in the yard. Every day I’d come home after school and swing from its sturdy hardwood limbs until my body was tired enough to get to sleep right after suppertime.

His cock was, I couldn’t help but notice, still hard.

This was the man I'd marry tonight. Gorgeous in every way. Calm, laid-back, and nonetheless entirely dangerous.

Maybe even for a woman like me.

He puckered his lips together as he moved to the closet, pulling it open to find a fresh pair of jeans and a black t-shirt on a hanger inside. He whistled as he did it. An old tune that I knew.

"Que Sera Sera."

Whatever will be, will be.

JOAN

As promised, Lock delivered me to the fifth floor in my soft bathrobe and comfy slippers, safe and sound.

“I’ll have to meet ye at the chapel tonight,” he warned me, catching my elbow as I stepped out of the elevator. “I’ve got Hellish business tae take care of all day, unfortunately. The attendants here will get yer dress to ye, take care of everything ye need.” With his free hand, he plucked at my short, messy waves. “But when yer done, ye go straight tae the church. I’ll be waitin’ for ye.”

“Why aren’t you meeting me here?” I asked immediately, gesturing to the beautiful fountains and ferns of the spa where Lock was leaving me like it was bridezilla daycare. “If you’ve got business in Hell to attend to, it would make the most sense for us to go together. Wouldn’t it?”

“It would,” Lock agreed. “But I’ve got tae go out into Vegas for somethin’ before the ceremony.” His green eyes flickered with something that looked like a challenge. “Ask me what it is. I ken ye want to.”

“All right...” I said slowly. He wasn’t wrong. I was a little curious about what Lock needed on Earth that he couldn’t get in Hell. “What is it, then?”

“A secret.” Lock winked, then laughed as I made a face. “I’ll show ye later. Be there by sunset, aye? It’s our wedding day. Don’t wanna be late.”

I fished my phone out of my pocket, checked the time and frowned.

“It’s barely seven in the morning now, Lock.” I was already far from stoked about spending even a few hours here in this spa. A girly-girl I was certainly not. “Sunset is ages from now. What am I supposed to do with all that time? Just lie back and let things happen?”

Lock smirked. “Pretty much, aye. I’ve scheduled ye for a soak in the hot springs with breakfast, then a facial, then a full-body massage...” Lock ticked off each treatment on his fingers as he listed it. His gaze shifted to the ceiling as he recalled them all. “Champagne luncheon, manicure, pedicure, hair, makeup...the works, really. Can’t quite remember it all, but anything else ye want, just let the attendants know. Ye’ll get it.”

I blinked. I couldn’t imagine asking to have anything more tacked onto Lock’s list. It was already a lot.

“And I really don’t have a choice in the matter?”

“Not if ye want to marry me tonight, ye don’t.” Lock winked. Cocky bastard. “But stay put here until yer ready to leave, aye?”

I arched an eyebrow. “What happens if I don’t?”

“Then I’ll find out about it,” Lock said. I supposed he probably would. The Inferno was part of Hell, and Hell was his domain. “And if I hear about ye wanderin’ round to the other levels, *snooping*—”

“I’m not planning on snooping,” I corrected him. “But I *would* like to start casing this joint.”

“—then I’ll take ye over my knee tonight and wallop that perky arse of yers raw before we consummate our union.” Lock punctuated this threat with a pleasant smile. “Might even enjoy myself while I do it. I’ve found myself a verrae fine new belt.”

“You’ll *spank* me?” A laugh of surprise leapt from my throat. It was tinged with nervousness and another leaping feeling—something beneath my belly that was almost *excited* by that idea. I shoved that feeling right back down. Before it caught. “With your belt? For—for doing my job?”

“Yes. I verrae much will.” His grip on my elbow tightened. His expression grew more serious. “Dinnae want you runnin’ into any trouble without me around. Not all the demons here are as nice as I am, Joanie. Ye’d do well to remember that.”

“Is that what you’d call what you are?” I snorted, recalling the trick he’d played on me earlier. Feeling me up while he pretended to sleep. “Nice?”

“Aye.” Lock gave a firm nod. “By comparison. So. No wandering. Stay on this floor. Sunset at the chapel. Go right there. Okay?”

“Aye.” I sneered his word back at him then glanced down at his grip on my elbow. “Can I commence with my day of torture now?”

“Course ye can. Just...one more thing.”

Lock yanked me toward him by my elbow and leaned in at the same time. I stumbled forward—right into a warm, whiskery kiss that he placed firmly on my cheek. The sensation set off a little chain reaction inside me. It felt like tiny, shimmering bubbles had been unleashed within my ribs.

His lips stayed there for a long moment before finally, he pulled away.

He was smiling again now.

“Call yer friend Bea sometime today. Ask her about me. She’ll tell ye true.” Slowly, he released his grip on my arm and stepped back into the elevator. “And now, yes. Ye can go. Try to enjoy yerself, eh? Ye might actually like it. Could be fun.”

I stared at him with a complete lack of enthusiasm as the elevator doors slid closed once more.

I supposed he was right. I *should* try to enjoy myself. Whether I would or not—hard to say.

I didn’t remember ever being at a spa before.

One thing was for sure, though.

I was definitely going to call Bea and get to the bottom of this: what Lock’s intentions were. If he was even who he said he was.

And most importantly of all...

If he was really someone that I could actually trust.

BREAKFAST WAS RIPE, chilled fruit cut into perfect, bite-sized pieces and ice-cold orange juice served in a frosted glass while I soaked in the hot springs. I ordered a coffee, hot and black while I endured my full-body massage.

By the time lunch rolled around, I was tempted to admit that Lock might have been right.

I *was* enjoying myself. Just a little bit. My muscles, which had still been cramped this morning from yesterday’s flight, felt more relaxed than they had in—well, ever, really. The facial left my skin feeling soft. When I caught sight of myself in a mirror, I’d been shocked to see that it had

almost completely erased any evidence that I was in the possession of pores.

Even without makeup on, I was glowing. I looked practically airbrushed. My body felt at ease for the first time in a very long time.

As I reclined on a lounge chair with tasty little bites of tapas laid out on gold platters all around me, I took a sip of champagne and pulled out my phone.

Maybe it was finally time to set my mind at ease as well.

“Joan?” Bea’s face was contorted with surprise—and a little confusion, too—when she picked up my video call. Her dark hair was piled atop her head in the messiest of messy buns. There was something that looked like banana mashed into the strap on her shirt, and there were bags under her eyes.

But when she smiled at me, she looked happy.

Happier than I’d ever seen her in my entire life.

“Hey,” I said, feeling a little awkward. I knew why she was so surprised—it had been a while since I’d be able to call. “Sorry for ghosting you. I was off the grid for a while, and I know it was probably—”

“Joan, don’t be ridiculous.” She laughed and rolled her eyes. “I mean, I’ve been worried about you—don’t say anything, I know you can take care of yourself. And I’ve missed you, too. We all have. But I’m just excited to talk to you again. How’ve you been?”

Slowly, I smiled back at her. “You first.”

I let Bea catch up to her life for a while. She said she was staying with a friend out in Vermont with Don and Abbie. Somewhere safe from the reaches of both Heaven and Hell. Abbie was growing fast. Bea had just put her down for a nap, but she carried her phone into the nursery so I could see her.

Abbie was beautiful and serene as she slept. A perfectly sweet, darling baby girl—even though Bea assured me that when she was hungry, she was every bit the demon that her father was.

“How’s Ava?” I asked. Unfortunately, our other best friend from our college days was someone else I’d fallen out of touch with while I was away on work.

“She’s okay,” Bea said, then pursed her lips. “But it sounds like her mom isn’t doing so well. Breast cancer. The chemo isn’t working well.”

“Morgana? Breast cancer?” A pang shot through my heart and I frowned. We’d spent a lot of our breaks from college at Ava’s mom’s place in the sleepy little town where Ava’s family kept a flower shop. Morgana was one of those women who managed to be elegant, down to earth, and completely formidable all at once. I’d always admired that about her. She’d always given off the impression that nothing in the world could slow her down. “I’m...*fuck*. I’m sorry to hear that. It...well. It sucks.”

There honestly weren’t words to describe how terrible that felt. I knew for Ava, it must have been even worse.

“Yeah...It really does.” Bea forced a sad smile and gave a pitiful shrug. “She’s holding in there, though, and Ava plus all her older sisters are around to hold down the fort. Maybe when you get a chance, you could give them a call, too. Or better yet, go visit. I know they’ve all missed you.”

“The visit might have to wait a while,” I admitted.

It hurt to know that Ava was hurting. That I’d been away for so long. That her mother was probably dying, and I’d had to hear it from anyone but Ava herself.

I hated that I’d had to all but abandon everyone close to me ever since I started working for the Covenant.

I hated that there was nothing that I could do to help.

I didn’t have the luxury of working my way through any of those feelings right now, though. I’d have to wait until later to really deal with them.

Until then, I did the same thing I always did: I pushed all those feelings down.

“I’ll call right after I get done talking to you,” I promised. “How’s Ava taking it?”

“As well as anyone can. She’s, uh...currently convinced she has a stalker,” Bea said with a small, tense laugh. “But don’t worry. It’s just Don’s brother, watching over her. Don says it’s better if she doesn’t know who—or what—he actually is.”

“Don sure does like keeping people in the dark,” I grumbled. I still wasn’t sold on Bea’s marriage to a demon, but he made her happy, which was what mattered.

I just knew how bad it felt not to have all the pieces to put the puzzle of a story together.

The Covenant liked to keep me in the dark as well.

“He’s just trying to protect Ava. We all are,” Bea assured me. “The more she knows, the more danger she’s in. But enough about us, Bea. Tell me about you!”

“Um. Well...” I sighed. My feelings about Bea’s demonic husband seemed downright hypocritical when I took into consideration what I was planning on doing tonight. But I knew that I couldn’t explain the whole situation to her. The Covenant would have my hide if they caught wind of it. If Lock was lying to me, Don might not be too happy about my mission either. “I think I’m in some pretty deep shit right now, if I’m being totally honest. I might be a little in over my head.”

“Oh, no.” Bea’s face fell again. “What’s wrong?”

“Can’t get into all of it. Too big of a risk.” I guessed I had my own secrets to keep from Bea, too. For her own safety—and for mine. “But I need to ask you about someone. It’s...important. Promise you’ll give it to me straight?”

“Of course,” Bea said—like she couldn’t imagine doing anything but. “Who is it? Do you have a name?”

“Lock,” I said. “Moloch, actually. He says he’s a King of Hell.”

Slowly, a smile spread across Bea’s lips. It was a little perplexing, but I took it as a good sign.

“I wondered if he’d managed to catch up to you,” said Bea. “I’m glad to hear it.”

“Catch up to me?” A vision of Lock lurking behind me down in the alleyways of London and sitting just behind me on a plane flooded my mind. If he’d been following me, I hadn’t noticed. And Lock was the kind of man who had a way of sticking out in a crowd. “What’s that supposed to mean? Has he been...chasing me, or something?”

“Oh.” Bea’s smile faded by half. “He, um...he hasn’t told you yet?”

I blinked. “Told me what? Bea, c’mon. You promised to—”

“I know what I promised.” Bea sighed. “But I promised it before I knew what you were going to ask. I’m sorry. That was...really dumb of me.”

“Not if you tell me what’s going on, it’s not,” I pointed out.

“No, it’s just...I want to tell you everything, Joan. I really do. But if Lock hasn’t told you himself yet, it’s probably for a good reason.”

I blanched. That was *not* the answer I wanted to hear.

“Are we going by Don’s definition of a *good reason*?”

I couldn’t imagine how anyone could really think they were protecting me by keeping me from the truth.

“Look, just...you trust me, don’t you?” Bea’s eyes were gently pleading.

“Generally speaking, yes,” I admitted with chagrin.

I had a feeling I knew where this was headed—and it was nowhere in the direction of the answers I needed right now.

“Lock is good,” Bea assured me. “He’s on our side.”

“Our side as in, me and you? Or our side as in, you and Don?”

“We’re all on the same side, Joan.” Slowly, Bea shook her head. She sounded tired. “There are big, terrible things going on in Heaven and Hell—and everywhere else, for that matter—that even I don’t totally understand. But if you trust me—”

“I’d like to,” I said tentatively. I’d always been able to in the past. I’d hoped that was a thing that would never have to change.

“Then believe me when I say that you can trust Lock. There’s so much more happening than what I can even fully explain—but Lock is a good man. He’ll tell you everything, way better than I can, as soon as it’s safe for you to know.”

“And here I was thinking knowledge was power,” I grumbled. I *did* trust Bea. Other than Ava, she was the only person that I even knew how to trust.

The two of them were the only true family that I’d ever really had.

“You, Joan Bouchard, are the most powerful woman I know,” Bea said with conviction. “I know how frustrating this must be for you, but I promise—for *real* this time—if you put your trust in Lock, do what he says and believe in him, everything will turn out okay.”

“I hope you’re right,” I muttered beneath my breath. There was something deeply annoying about the idea of having to *obey* Lock. But I supposed I’d have to get used to it. I had a feeling it might end up in our vows. “Because I’m marrying him tonight.”

“What?” Bea moved a little closer to the phone. “I think you broke up there for a second.”

“It’s nothing,” I lied. “But Bea—”

I was cut off by the sound of a baby crying. Abbie, probably. She must’ve been hungry. Her screams sounded like they’d come straight from

here in Hell.

Bea gave me an apologetic grimace and held up a finger. A moment later, a beautiful blonde woman joined Bea on the screen with little Abbie in her arms.

The blonde passed Abbie off to Bea, then glanced at the camera. Her blue eyes went wide for a moment as she saw my face. She opened her mouth like she meant to say something to me—but then snapped it shut a moment later and stepped away.

“Um...” I began once Bea had quieted Abbie down and I assumed the blonde was out of earshot. “Bea...what was that about?”

This time, Bea’s smile twisted like she was trying to hold in a big, juicy secret. But her excitement sparkled in her eyes just the same.

“You’re going to find out soon, I think,” she said. “Lock will explain everything when it’s safe for him to. And when whatever you two are up to is finally over, you should come up here to Vermont so you can meet her. Abbie, too.” Bea cast a glance off-screen, then laughed. “I know they’d love to meet you.”

LOCK

When I first saw my bride-to-be in her wedding gown, she was trudging down the Vegas Strip toward me at sunset with her skirts hiked up to her thighs, looking like she was in search of something evil to kill.

I didn't know what had pissed her off while I'd been attending to my own to-do list, but whatever it was, it'd done a damn fine job of it.

She drew closer. Close enough I could see that her eyes weren't puffy, but her mascara was smudged like she'd been crying. Her ruby red lips were set in a scowl. Her veil was lopsided, and she'd traded the delicate blue heels I'd picked out for her for a pair of sturdy-looking combat boots.

She may as well have been dragging a storm cloud behind her like a big, thundering balloon.

She looked like a mess. She looked as upset as I'd ever seen her.

My heartbeat skidded to a dead stop in my chest, then picked back up into a racehorse of a pace.

My first thought was that I was going to kill whoever had troubled her so. Kill 'em slow and painful, so they'd know exactly how badly they'd fucked up.

My second thought was that she was, far away, the most exquisite fucking creature I'd ever laid eyes on. Smudged mascara or no.

"Joanie." I grabbed her shoulders as she tried to stomp right past me. "Joanie, what's wrong?"

I swung her around to face me. She tried to tear herself from my grasp, but I held firm.

“Let go,” she snapped. “I don’t want to talk about it. Let’s just get this over with.”

“No.” I leaned down so she and I were nearly at eye level. For such a dangerous spitfire of a woman, she was still so incredibly small. “We’re no goin’ anywhere until ye tell me what’s happened. Who’s bothered ye? Give me his name—the look of him—anything—”

“It’s not like that, Lock,” she insisted, looking away. “Really. Let it go.”

Didn’t really matter what it was like, though. There was fire in my chest and bloodlust in my heart.

I wasn’t going to be able to focus on anything else until I’d set this right.

“I’ll fuckin’ kill him, Joanie. Whoever it is. I dinnae care. I will. Ye have my word. I’ll end him.” A thousand different manners of torture flashed through my mind, each more satisfying than the last. “I’ll castrate him. I’ll turn his flesh inside out, so his skin’s in his center and his bones are blowin’ in the wind. I’ll snuff his soul out like a cigarette, aye, and while his lifetime smolders and burn, I’ll lop off his cock and I’ll make him—”

“Stop it, Lock.” Joan’s eyes flashed over to mine. They were fierce and shining wet with tears. “There isn’t a *him* for you to castrate or kill.” She looked away again. “I’ve just gotten some bad news. It took me a while to process it and...and I’m just in a bad mood, okay? Am I allowed to be in a bad mood without you trying to murder someone?”

“Not really, no,” I admitted. “Will ye talk to me? Please? Just tell me what’s wrong and I’ll make it right. I won’t kill anyone.” I considered that statement for a moment and quickly reassessed it. “Right. I *probably* won’t kill anyone.” I reassessed again. “Well. Depends. I still might.”

“It’s...” Joan let out a heavy breath and closed her eyes. “My friend Ava. I’ve been out of contact with her a while, and today Bea told me that Ava’s mother is sick. Breast cancer. I called Ava right after I got off the phone with Bea. It sounds like her mother...she probably doesn’t have long now.” Another breath. In and out like she was trying to calm herself. Didn’t look like it worked. “And that upsets me, because that’s a normal

thing to be upset about. So unless you've got some kind of magical cure for cancer—"

"Never done it before, no," I said, "but sure. I can try."

"Yeah. I'm not surprised. That's exactly what I thought you'd—" Joan looked back at me, clearly puzzled. "Wait. Did you just say...you'd *try*?"

"Are ye no listenin' to me, lass?" I wanted to shake her, but she seemed pretty shaken up already. Didn't seem right. "I've no got any experience with it, mind—curing cancer isn't really much of a demon thing to get up to unless someone's tryin' to angle for a Faustian bargain kind of thing—but I've got some healin' in me, ye ken? Usually, just for battle wounds and the like, but—"

"Lock?"

I blinked. "Joanie?"

"Stop talking for a second." She furrowed her brow and took a step back...then two steps closer. When her eyes met mine again, they were shining with something other than tears. Something like hope. "Are you serious about this? You'll...you'll really try to help?"

"Course I will. Why would I go joking 'bout a thing like that?"

"You joke about a lot of things, Lock. You seem to positively relish any chance you get to trick me and torture me and—"

"Fuck's sake! Do ye really think so little of me?"

A jolt of hurt shot through my gut. I searched her eyes for whatever was behind them, trying to see this horrible picture of me I'd managed to put in her head in the short time she'd known me this time around.

Right now, she was confirming every worry that I had about all of this. That I really had changed since the angels had taken her memories. That I wasn't the same man she'd fallen in love with anymore.

That maybe, I'd never be able to be that man ever again.

Still, though. This was Joan. *My* Joan. I loved her. I needed her. No matter who I was now, I would've torn the entire universe apart at its seams just on the off chance it might make her smile.

I had to try.

"I'm a fallen angel, lass," I told her solemnly. "No a monster. If I say I'll try to help, I mean it. I will."

"I..." Joan's mouth opened, then closed, then opened again as she lowered her eyes. "I don't think you're a monster. I...I'm..." She sighed. I

could see her anger leaving her shoulders along with it. “I’m sorry. I don’t think little of you, Lock. At least...I don’t anymore.”

“Well...” I let out a hot huff of air out of my nose. Had it been this hard to make her like me the last time we’d done this? The way I remembered it, last time she’d fancied me straight away. Fucking angels. Ruined everything. And so had I. “Well, good, then. I’ll go tomorrow if I can get away. The next day, if I can’t. Can’t promise ye results, but I wouldn’t try if I didn’t think it was possible. I’ll do the best that I can. Fair enough?”

Joan nodded, keeping her eyes on the ground. “Yes. Thank you. Fair enough.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah,” she confirmed. “Yeah.”

I took her chin in my hands and turned her face up toward mine. With my thumbs, I wiped the smudges of her mascara away. Scrubbed my hands against my thighs to clean them—the slacks were black, and they were mine, so it didn’t matter if they got dirty. Took the comb of her veil and repositioned it until it was sitting right.

There wasn’t much I could do about her combat boots. But then again, I wasn’t sure I wanted to do anything about them at all. She’d obviously chosen them herself. Probably asked one of the attendants at Vexations to fetch them for her.

If she preferred them over heels, I wasn’t about to stop her from wearing them.

It was Joan’s wedding day. She deserved to wear whatever the fuck she liked.

“There ye are.” I lowered my hands and stepped back, nodding at her with satisfaction. “Ye look beautiful, lass.”

“You’re just saying that,” she mumbled with a shake of her head.

“And I’ll say it again.” With more feeling this time. So maybe she’d believe it. “Ye look fuckin’ beautiful.”

She did.

“Thank you, Lock.” She forced a smile as she looked up at me. “You don’t clean up so bad yourself.”

“Aye, well...” I rubbed the back of my head and glanced at the chapel. The sun was all but set now. We were definitely going to be late, and it was worth every minute of it anyway. “Are ye ready, lass?”

I offered her my hand. She glanced down at it, then back up at me.

There was something new in her eyes now. Something shining and intense. In the blacks of her irises...something suddenly bright.

She moved toward me quickly. She must have, to catch me off guard so well. But the way I saw it, it happened in slow motion. As I drew in a breath, I managed to track her every move.

Her hands reached up to brush against my cheeks. Her fingers combed through my beard, then twisted themselves in the freshly oiled thickness of it. Her body moved against mine, pressing close as she pulled my face down toward hers.

Her lips found mine by inches, then fractions of inches, then by a measurement smaller still. Her breath was humid as it mingled with my own for a moment, then—

She kissed me. Not hard. Not with tongue. Not passionately, or even particularly romantically.

But still.

She kissed me.

And as her lips moved against mine, I felt my entire world fall apart, then start sewing itself back together again, stitch by aching stitch.

My Joanie.

My bride.

My Joan.

SHE BUMBLED her way through her vows. The fat man in the Elvis costume presiding over our little ceremony had to repeat them all for her twice, and still, she stumbled at every word. The words he gave her to parrot back covered all the usual things: to honor. To cherish. To love.

She botched every line of them, stammering and stuttering away like they didn't sit right on her tongue. They probably didn't. It didn't matter.

Not to me.

Once upon a time, Joan Bouchard had loved me. She'd loved me hot and searing, like the flame of a candle held beneath a tender palm. She'd loved me soft and sweet as the tickle of heather beneath bare feet. She'd loved me, and I'd lost her. I'd failed her. Meddling angels had whisked that love off into oblivion.

She didn't remember the man she'd fallen in love with now. He'd died during his last kiss with her. Drawn his last breath when she pulled her lips

away.

It was me she was marrying today. Not him.

Couldn't blame her for not getting the vows right. She didn't mean them. Even if she had, I wouldn't have deserved them.

If I'd been worthy of the love of a woman like her, I wouldn't have lost her in the first place.

Still. Whatever small part of the man that I'd been still lived inside me because of the love I had for her.

She'd earned every last bit of it.

When it came time for me to make my own vows, I held my hand up to Fat Elvis so he'd shut up for long enough to let me say my piece.

"I ken ye dinnae love me, Joanie." Fat Elvis' jaw dropped at those words, but I didn't care. Hell's bells. This wasn't about him anyway. "I'll no ask ye to give me anything more than what ye wish. Not honor, not cherishing—and no. Not love. As for obedience...well." I smiled softly. Chuckled. "Wouldnae mind that, truth be told. Wouldnae mind yer trust, either." I took her hands in mine. Found those dark eyes I so enjoyed getting lost in. Squeezed her fingertips and bit my lip. "But these are my vows, I s'pose, and I'll give them to ye true."

Lock, Joan mouthed at me. Her expression was stuck somewhere between confused and oddly touched. *What are you doing?*

"I'm going to protect ye, Joan Marie Bouchard," I said with a little nod of acknowledgment to her. I knew I was laying it on thick, but it was the only way my heart knew how to lay. "I'm going to respect ye, and I'm going to do right by ye, and...ach. I'm probably going to piss ye off somethin' fierce most of the time." I gave her a grin. Those red lips of hers twitched like she was dangerously close to giving me one right back. "But everything I do as yer husband, I'll do for yer own good. Even when it makes ye want to cuff me on the ear and call me a bastard. Even when it's hard, aye, and even when it hurts."

And love you, I added as I slipped the simple gold band on her pretty finger. Not out loud, but inside my heart to myself. If she saw it in my eyes or heard it on a prayer, that might have been nice. But this wasn't for me. It was for her. *I'll love you until I die, and arrogant arseholes like me live for a long fucking time.*

"Uh," said Fat Elvis, sweating with discomfort and tugging the high collar of his jumpsuit away from his neck. "Well, uh...uh-huh. You may

now kiss the bride?”

“Can I?” I asked her. She’d kissed me right before all this, true, but that had been its own thing. A kind of thank you, I was pretty sure. This was different. I wanted her word that it would be all right. “Would ye mind?”

“No,” Joan said softly. She took a step closer, licked her red lips, then turned them up toward mine. “You can kiss me. I wouldn’t mind at all.”

I tried to make it slow, like her kiss to me had been. But my body ached for her fiercely. My cock swelled at just the mere promise of her lips against mine. My breath was painfully full in my lungs from a sharp inhale of excitement and—well.

I’d vowed that all I did would be for her own good. It was a promise that I’d keep.

I hadn’t exactly promised anything about *being* good. If I’d been made to behave myself, I wouldn’t have ever fallen from Heaven in the first place.

I tugged her body against mine hard, wound an arm around her slender waist, and raked my fingers through her hair. My lips moved to her like my mouth had only ever known hunger. My tongue forced its entry, lapping against her like only she could quench my thirst.

I reveled in her. I worshiped to her. She was the only prayer I’d ever bothered to learn. I panted and I conquered and I claimed her, just for that small moment, entirely for my own. I consecrated her in my own name, and my unholy body burned for it, and that was fine. I was a King of Hell. I’d been born to burn.

Somewhere through all the smoke and ash of my need for her, I realized something truly beautiful.

I wasn’t just kissing Joan.

Joan was kissing me back.

“So,” Joan said as I carried her out of the chapel. As soon as I’d gotten tired of Fat Elvis tapping me on the shoulder and clearing his throat, obviously eager for us to get the fuck out of his honky-tonk angel church, I’d scooped her up into my arms and flicked him the V behind her back on the way out.

“So,” I said. I was the smuggest bastard in all of Las Vegas in that moment. Maybe in the entire universe.

Joan was my wife. I was her husband.

I'd kissed her like I was planning on fucking her right there on the altar of Fat Elvis, before the King and the Almighty alike, and out of some stroke of impossible luck, she'd kissed me back.

"So," Joan repeated. She sounded as moonstruck by it all as I felt. "Love, huh?"

"Huh?" I didn't mean to offend her, and I was hardly about to argue with hearing that word on her pretty lips, but I had no fucking clue what she was talking about.

"Love," she said again. "That's a pretty big thing to vow to someone you only just met last night."

I arched an eyebrow and kicked the chapel's door open. "I didn't say love, did I?"

I'd thought it. Intensely. But had I said it? No. I wouldn't have dared.

"Well, you certainly said everything else," said Joan. I couldn't argue with that. "And...yeah. I'm pretty sure you said it. I heard you. It...kind of caught me off guard."

"What?" My brow furrowed with confusion. I hadn't said it. I knew I hadn't. But if she'd heard it... "Joanie, I think you might have—*ach! Shite!*"

I hissed with pain as something bright and sharp struck my shoulder. When I turned my head to see what it was, I found a white-hot length of iron sticking out of my upper arm—mere inches away from Joan's face.

"What the fuck was—" Joan started, but there was no time to let her finish.

"We're being attacked, lass." I set her down outside of the chapel and shifted my body in front of hers, so she was wedged between me and the door. "Stay behind me—and if I tell ye to run, ye'd best make those boots hit pavement hard."

"Is it demons?" Joan asked. Behind me, I heard her knuckles crack.

If this had been any other time, I might have laughed.

That was my Joan all right. My wife. Always ready for a fight.

This was no time for laughter, though. The blessed iron sticking out of my shoulder had ensured that I wouldn't be laughing again until this battle was won.

"Not demons." I raised my eyes to the darkened heavens and found seven pairs of white wings flapping down toward Earth. "Angels."

I said the word like it was a curse.
Right now, it couldn't have been more of one.

JOAN

My mouth was tinny with the taste of adrenaline. My chest still ached with something unnamable that Lock had stirred up in it—first with his promise that he would help heal Ava’s mother, then again during his vows when I’d heard him say the word *love*.

I didn’t know why he didn’t remember saying it. It was a moment that I didn’t think I’d ever be able to forget. He’d been so earnest about his vows. So strikingly *honest*. Watching his mouth form the word—the flick of his tongue on the *L*, the sensual closing of the *O*, the graze of his teeth against his lower lip on the *V*, the gentle parting of the silent *E*—had filled my head with thoughts of all the other things Lock’s mouth might do to me later tonight.

His kiss had sealed the deal for me. When we got back to the Inferno, I was going to fuck him. I was going to *enjoy* fucking him. I could hardly wait to feel the crush of his lips against mine again, this time naked in our shared bed.

It could have been a nice night.

But of course, before we’d even exited the chapel, the universe had already revealed that it had other plans for us.

Angels. The broad spans of their heavy white wings were painted neon by the glow of the Vegas Strip as they descended through the night. The Covenant had warned me in each of my briefing emails that I might run

into such beings at some point. The way they described angels, I was supposed to be just as wary of them as I was demons. If not even more so.

Angels were cold, calculating warriors who fought with conviction. But just like beings from Hell, the Covenant had warned me, they weren't interested in ensuring that humanity survived the upcoming battle that would decide the fate of the Earth.

Heaven and Hell only had eyes for each other in the war to end all wars. They'd each stop at nothing to best each other. All they cared about was ensuring that, when the smoke cleared and the battle was over, their side was the side that won.

"Moloch," the first angel to touch down on solid earth called out with an icy glare. "I'm sure you already know what I'm here for."

He had dark hair and a face that was almost too symmetrical. He was the kind of handsome that was hard to look at for too long. Just glancing at him made me feel hyper-aware of all my flaws, both big and small. In one hand, he held a shimmering ball of white light. In his other, he carried a sword.

"Aye, Gabriel." Lock already sounded utterly done with this situation. There was a casual confidence in his voice. Beneath that, there was something dangerous about his tone. A threat so clear, he didn't even need to put it into words. "But ye'll no get it. Best save yerself the effort and piss off."

"You know I can't do that." The first angel—Gabriel—shook his head as six other angels, all just as uncannily handsome as he was, landed all around us. "We should have known better to trust a deal with demons. This is the second time you infernal creatures have violated our agreement. You may have gotten away with it the first time, but this time—you'll have to answer for the chaos you've caused."

Agreement? I couldn't imagine what Heaven and Hell might have come to an agreement on. The way I understood it, they were opposing armies. Enemies deadlocked in an eternal war. What on Earth would they have been able to come to an agreement on?

Or, a better question—how had Hell managed to break their deal twice?

I wanted to ask Lock, but he looked a little busy in the moment. He kept his shoulders relaxed, but in his stance, he looked ready to spring into action at any moment. Even from behind him, nestled between the

protection of his body and the chapel's door, I recognized the posture of a practiced warrior awaiting the perfect time to enter the fight.

If he really intended to do this without my help, though, surely he knew it was a fight he'd lose.

We were outnumbered. It didn't matter how good Lock was at brawling. Seven-on-one—even for the best fighter, those were near impossible odds.

"Put him down," Gabriel ordered the angels on either side of him. "Leave the human for me."

The tension in the air snapped into action like lightning had just struck. Gabriel hurled the ball of light at Lock as the other angels rushed forward.

Lock met the light with a ball of pure flame summoned in his own hand. It exploded in the midst of everything, creating a burst of brightness so intense, I had to hold a hand up to shield my eyes from it.

When that brightness faded, I saw that Lock was covered in angels. He staggered as they choked at his neck and dug their fingers into his shoulders and arms.

The fight had just begun, and already he was threatening to go down.

"Ye fuckin' cowards," he roared, throwing his arms out. The angels clinging to each of them were tossed to the side, but kept their hold on him. "Don't even have the guts to fight me one on one?"

"It's not cowardice," Gabriel explained, summoning another ball of light in his hand. When he let this one loose, Lock wouldn't be free to retaliate. "One on one with you? Wouldn't be a fair fight."

I admired Lock's conviction that he could take all these angels down without my help, but already I could see that it wouldn't end well for either of us.

Besides, I knew I could hold my own.

It would've been both impractical and downright stupid not to throw my hat into the ring as well.

Or, technically speaking, not my hat—

My veil.

I dragged the comb of my veil out of my hair and rushed forward. Taking the thin, gauzy fabric between my hands, I threw it over the head of the angel clinging to Lock's right arm and twisted it tight at the base of his skull. He let out a yelp of surprise, then let go of Lock to claw at the veil as I pulled it taut around his throat.

I swung the angel around with the veil in my fist, releasing it only when I knew I had the momentum to throw his body to the side.

When Gabriel released his next attack, Lock managed to summon the fire to counter it just in the nick of time.

I was ready for the explosion of light this time around. Already, my body was on a trajectory to collide with the angel I'd just tossed to the ground. He was blinded as he tried to stagger to his feet, but my eyes were closed. Safe from the light.

I felt myself collide with the angel. Caught off guard, he crashed back to the pavement. I came down hard on his chest and followed through with my fist, slamming it into his throat.

He tried to grab me by the hair and drag me off of him as he gasped and choked, but my hair wasn't long enough for him to get his fingers into properly. I rolled back, leaving him clutching at air. When he tried to rise again, I was already on my feet.

I raised my combat boot, catching him beneath the jaw with it. This time, when his head clapped against the ground, he didn't rise again.

One down.

Six more to go.

When I raised my gaze to Lock again, I realized my count was off. With one hand free, he'd managed to incapacitate two more of the angels while I'd taken out my own.

Now, we only had to contend with Gabriel, who was keeping his distance, and the three angels who were clustered around Lock.

Two of the angels were trading blows with Lock at close range. A third was clinging to Lock's neck from behind still. The only blows they were managing to land on him were the ones they got in while Lock countered Gabriel's attacks. Every hit they gave him, he returned it twice as hard when he got the chance.

He was an incredible fighter. Gabriel had been right about that.

One on one wouldn't have been fair at all.

Still, I saw an opening. Another opportunity to help.

"Lock!" I shouted at him, waving my hand in a quick come-hither. I didn't know how to communicate what I wanted to him. Yelling it out would have taken away the element of surprise.

But as Lock's gaze fell upon the angel that I'd knocked out, then met mine, it was like something clicked between us.

He knew exactly what I wanted. I didn't know how he knew—but he did.

Lock reeled toward me and hurled his torso forward in a sharp jerk. The angel on his back swung forward in an arc of feathers and confusion.

He had to let go of Lock's neck just to find his feet before he hit the ground. As he stumbled forward, I launched myself at him, already prepared with an attack of my own.

Another burst of light as Lock countered an attack from Gabriel. It happened as the angel ran straight into my fist with his nose. My knuckles ached with contact, but I knew better than to let up.

Instead, I followed through, then swung my leg around in a vicious kick to further knock him backward.

Three left to go.

Lock and I dealt with the two other close-range angels with an elegance that was almost like dancing. Each of Lock's movements was something I could predict. Each of my responses was perfectly crafted to compliment Lock's pace.

We blocked and parried each of the angels' attacks in ways that caught them off guard again and again. The explosions from Lock and Gabriel's long-range battle were coming faster now, but they didn't matter.

Soon, the other two angels would be too worn out to keep fighting.

Then, only Gabriel would be left.

Or so I thought.

As the other two angels launched themselves at Lock simultaneously, Lock stumbled backwards into the alleyway next to the chapel. I rushed after them, prepared to punch the one closest to me hard in the base of his spine. But before I could, I felt myself jerked backward.

"Not so fast," Gabriel sneered in my ear.

I realized my mistake in an instant—during that last explosion of light, Gabriel must have used the moment to reposition himself.

He twirled me around to face him, his fingers tight in my hair right up against my scalp.

"You're a problem for me, Joan Bouchard." His eyes were dark and cold. He didn't look like he was planning on enjoying what he was about to do. "And problems for me are problems for the entire world."

He pressed the edge of his sword against my cheek as he pulled my body against his. The blade was so sharp that I wouldn't have even

realized I'd been cut if it hadn't been for a warm trickle down to my jawline. Blood.

"This has to stop," Gabriel growled in my ear. "I'm sorry. This is for your own good."

Then, keeping my head in place with the threat of his sword so I couldn't pull away, Gabriel puckered his lips.

In the shell of my ear, he let out a whistle. Or at least, that's what it should have sounded like.

Inside my head, it sounded like a trumpet blaring—a high, brash note that set off an explosion of white light behind my eyes and a pang of dread in my heart.

Gabriel moved his sword away and released my hair. Without him holding me up anymore, I stumbled forward a little, reeling.

"What was that?" I whispered, clutching at my ears. The sound was still echoing around within me, bouncing back and forth against the inside of my skull. "What did you just do?"

But before he could answer, Lock finished laying out the other two remaining angels. He threw one off his back hard, sending the angel's body hurling brutally against the alley's wall. The other, Lock knocked out with a bullish jerk forward. His forehead cracked against the angel's face and in response, the angel dropped to the ground.

Neither got back up.

"Get the fuck away from my wife," Lock snarled, launching himself forward.

He took Gabriel by the throat, and in a violent instant, slammed Gabriel's body down in a cruel, rage-filled show of force.

Lock pressed a knee into Gabriel's chest. His fists pounded down on Gabriel's head over and over again. At first, Gabriel was able to hold up his arms to glance away a few of the blows, but Lock was angry. Vicious. Relentless.

He wouldn't be stopped. Couldn't be denied.

Slowly, Gabriel lost the energy to defend himself.

Lock, on the other hand, showed no sign of letting up at all.

If he kept this up, he was going to kill Gabriel. I didn't know if that was even possible—but seeing Lock unload his fury down on Gabriel's face with his knuckles like this, it was hard to imagine this ending in anything but Gabriel's death.

“Lock!” I stumbled forward, grabbing Lock’s fist from behind just before he brought it down on Gabriel’s face again. “Stop it! You can’t... can’t reason with him if he’s dead.”

I didn’t know how I stopped him from sending down yet another blow. My arms felt weak and in my ears, my own voice sounded like it was coming from the other side of the city. But at my touch, Lock’s shoulders tensed—then relaxed.

He lowered his fist.

“I can’t kill him anyway, mo chridhe.” Lock’s voice was raw and tight in his throat. “Not wi’out cursed iron, anyhow. But aye—I’d like to. I see yer point.” The rage in his eyes shifted to quick, flashing fear as he glanced over his shoulder at me. “Joanie...are ye all right? Ye look awful pale—”

“I’m fine,” I panted, stumbling back a few steps. That was a lie, but hopefully one I could keep selling for a few more minutes. “Just...just deal with him. So we can get out of here.”

“Aye. All right.” Lock stooped down and grabbed hold of the front of Gabriel’s shirt. “Hey there, lad. You and me need to have a little chat about hittin’ on my wife.”

If my head hadn’t felt so full of cotton in that moment, I would have laughed.

When he wanted to, Lock certainly had a way with words.

“You have no fucking shame,” Gabriel rasped as Lock dragged him up. I tried hard to listen to his voice, but my ears were still ringing. “You’re lucky the world hasn’t been thrown off its axis already for what you’ve done tonight. And to think—when you agreed to our terms, you really tried to convince us that Heaven and Hell could be on the same side for once.”

“We’re on the same side still, ye wee idiot.” Lock tightened his grip on the front of Gabriel’s shirt with a snarl of his lips. “But we’ve got intelligence that ye don’t. If ye were more willing to cooperate instead of goin’ round swingin’ yer sword first, askin’ questions later—”

My knees went weak as they spoke. I stumbled against the wall to my right as I felt my chest seize up. I rested my forehead against the chapel’s siding and clutched at the place just over my heart, feeling for blood. But there was no wound. Just a sense of something gone terribly, horribly wrong.

“And why should we bother cooperating?” A few feet away, Gabriel seemed oblivious to the effects his whistle was having on me. Or maybe, through all the pain Lock had just pounded into his bloody, broken face, he just didn’t care. “The last deal we struck with you, you’ve ignored completely. Doesn’t exactly inspire much trust.”

“Because,” said Lock, “Leviathan is involved.”

“Leviathan?” Gabriel’s brow furrowed in an instant. He looked legitimately afraid. “But...what does he want? How—”

“Yerself and Michael should consult with Lucifer on the subject when ye get a chance—it might change yer tune.”

“Lock,” I rasped, clinging to the wall. I didn’t want to interrupt him, but my entire body was trembling. Inside my chest, something sharp and prickling was beginning to take root.

Lock’s eyes met mine for a moment. I could see the concern in his greens.

We didn’t have time to continue entertaining Gabriel. Whatever was happening to me—it wasn’t good.

“Hold on, lass,” Lock said to me, turning back to Gabriel. “Almost done.”

“But—” Gabriel began in protest. His words fell in deaf ears.

Lock cut him off before he could make his argument, raising his fist up and thumping it down on the top of Gabriel’s head. Gabriel’s eyes rolled up and his body slumped to the ground in an instant.

Knocked out cold.

My heart was cold, too. With every slow, aching contraction of it, I felt its chill spread. It pumped an icy slush of blood through my veins. My fingers, toes and lips tingled painfully. Beneath the red of my lipstick, I was certain my mouth was in the process of turning blue.

“Hold on, Joanie,” Lock whispered to me as he swept me up in his arms. “I’ve got ye. Yer all right.”

As soon as I felt his touch, my knees gave out. I shivered against him, desperate to claim some of his warmth. But even though I could feel the heat of his chest against my cheek, the cold inside me refused to melt.

I closed my eyes to the sound of wings unfurling. My world went into a tailspin as Lock took to the skies, flying us off into the night.

But despite his soothing words in that gorgeous brogue of his, I knew in my frozen heart that he was lying.

I wasn't going to be all right.

Not now.

Not at all.

LOCK

I carried my bride to our wedding bed like our lives depended on it. Hers truly did—and my life was bound to hers.

I already knew that losing her felt like dying. I wasn't keen on feeling that again.

"Talk to me, Joanie," I urged her as I sat down on the bed. I kept her in my lap so I could hold her. Her body was chilled through. Keeping her close to the heat of my chest was the best way to try to pass on some of my warmth. "Don't fade out on me now."

"I'm trying not to," she assured me. "But it's hard, Lock. It's...my eyes are so heavy. Everything is...is..."

"Everything's going to be fine," I promised. "Like I told ye before—I've got some healing. I can patch ye up. Just need to know where you're hurt, aye?"

My fingertips brushed against her cheekbone, finding blood. It was cold and already clotting. A thin cut that ran from her temple down towards her nose.

"How did this happen?" I asked.

"Gabriel," she breathed. "His sword." She clenched her eyes shut tight. "Do you think...?"

"No. That wouldnae have done all this." Gabriel's sword was made of blessed iron, same as the piece of metal that had pierced my shoulder on the way out of the chapel where we'd said our vows. But Joan wasn't

infernal. Not a demon or a fallen angel. She only had the misfortune of being married to one. “It must be something else.”

“Who’s Leviathan, Lock?” Joan asked as I took her wrist in my hand and turned her arm over, scanning for additional wounds.

“Mean auld bastard,” I told her. The information wouldn’t hurt her. She might as well know what we were up against. “Ye may have met him already. Do ye recall the lad yer friend Bea was supposed to marry?”

“Simon Roth.” Joan rolled her eyes. “I don’t *love* Don for Bea, but I have to admit...Simon was way, way worse. What’s he got to do with Leviathan, though?”

“Levi Roth, Simon’s father,” I explained. “Leviathan’s been livin’ on Earth under a human disguise, ye see.”

“*Levi*?” Joan drew back as a wary look settled into her eyes. “He always gave me the creeps, honestly—but I had no idea he was...well. Actually dangerous. I just thought he was another sinister rich guy.”

“And he is,” I confirmed. “But long before that, he was an angel. Just like I was. He fell from Heaven with the rest of us when our rebellion failed. But he wasnae verrae interested in joining forces under Lucifer’s rule. Went off and made his own way.” I shifted my attentions to her boots. They didn’t look like they’d been pierced by anything, but they looked heavy on her feet. “He’s had a long time on his own, back on Earth. His powers aren’t from Heaven or Hell—they’re all his own. That’s what makes him dangerous. For all of us, really—angels and demons alike.”

“What did you promise the angels?” she asked next. It was a hell of a time to go angling for revelations, but by my reckoning, keeping her talking was keeping her awake.

In that moment, I was prepared to give her any answers she liked.

“Not to go draggin’ humans into hellish affairs,” I admitted. I pulled one of her little combat boots off her foot, then started plucking apart the laces of the other. “As ye may have noticed, it hasn’t worked out very well.”

“We’re married, aren’t we?” She traced the curve of my shoulder with the tip of her nose. “That’s hardly an affair.”

A laugh of surprise left my lips. “Suppose yer right in that. Shame the angels don’t agree.”

I tossed her other boot aside and gave her feet a once-over, just in case. No wounds. Just ten perfect toes, high arches, pretty ankles. A little tattoo

of a bull etched into her skin in the cradle of her Achilles heel.

She'd gotten that for me. We'd gone together late one night when we were a few drinks in and far too thrilled at the prospect of making bad decisions together. I had one for her, too—a fleur-de-lis on my arse.

I could still remember the way it had made her laugh.

"I'm going to undress ye now," I warned her. "I'm no meaning to be a bastard about it or nothin'—but I need to see where you're hurt."

"It's okay," she assured me. "Do what you need. I trust you. I understand."

My heart lodged itself up into my throat at that word. *Trust*.

What a precious gift that was.

And it couldn't have arrived at a more opportune time.

Her body was heavy in my arms as I unlaced her dress. She didn't seem to have the energy to hold herself up—but while that was worrying for its own reasons, I didn't mind doing all the work.

Even at her heaviest, my arms were strong and Joan was light. I moved her carefully, like a fragile doll. It was a new sensation for me, truth be told.

Joan was the least fragile woman I'd ever met.

When her dress was away, she was left on my lap in only her white lace panties and her matching bra. I left them for the moment as I ran my hands up and down her body, checking every inch of her skin.

It was a small privacy that I quickly realized I was going to have to take away.

"I cannae find any marks on ye, lass," I admitted. Carefully, I hooked a finger beneath the strap of her bra and ran my thumb up and down its lace. "I might have to...well..."

"It's fine, Lock. Do what you need." She closed her eyes, nodded, then rubbed her cheek against my chest. "Will you hold me beneath the blankets when you're done, though? I'm freezing like this."

"Course I will," I said, like it was obvious. It should have been. If she'd let me, I'd hold her any way she liked.

I reached behind her back to unhook her bra. Her breasts spilled out of the cups as it fell away. She had gorgeous breasts. Perfectly symmetrical. Perfect, full, firm...not that this was the time for praising her for them, but still.

Her skin was sun-kissed with not a tan line to be found. Her peaks were the color of small, dark pink roses. As I ran my hands over them, searching for even the smallest of wounds, I found none—but her nipples hardened for me and her skin turned to gooseflesh at my touch.

“That feels nice,” she mumbled.

She wasn’t wrong. It felt nice to me too. But I had to grit my teeth and maintain focus.

It was a glory, having an excuse to touch every inch of my bride like this. But I couldn’t let my own pleasure get in the way of finding what was wrong with her.

Her skin was too fucking cold for comfort, and the way she shivered against me—it had me worried.

I needed to set this right.

Her knickers came off next. I hooked my fingers beneath their lace, struggling with them for a moment—then, I gave up. Said *fuck it*. Put my thumb through the delicate fabric on either side of them and ripped them apart. Tossed them aside.

“Look at you,” she murmured, forcing a small laugh from her throat. “Barely married, and you’re already tearing my panties off.”

“Aye.” I couldn’t pretend that the notion hadn’t occurred to me before that moment. She had the kind of body that was begging to be torn out of anything it wore. My hands were happy to oblige. “Woulda liked to do it under more fortuitous circumstances, mind.”

“Maybe later,” she joked.

What a fucking wonder she was. Hurt like this, and still trying to make me laugh.

I didn’t fucking deserve her.

That, too, I was going to have to find some way to make right.

“You’re wounded badly, lass. I...I cannae figure out the how of it, though.” Her entire body was cold and beautiful and bruised from the fight. But not pierced. Save for the cut on her cheek, not even marred. “When did this happen? This coldness in ye—when did it start?”

“When I was fighting Gabriel. Near the end,” she admitted. “You were busy putting the other two angels down, and he pulled me to him—”

“Did he kiss ye? Force himself?” Surely not. Joan was my wife. And while Gabriel might’ve been a celestial bastard of the highest order, he was still an angel. He wouldn’t have dared.

“He whistled at me. In my ear.” Joan shifted in my arms and pressed the heels of her hands against either side of her head, like she was trying to block out a deafening sound. “It was like a trumpet blaring inside my head. I’m still hearing it. Even now.” She winced with pain as she glanced up at me. “I think it’s stopping my heart.”

“A trumpet...” A bitter taste filled my mouth. I twisted my lips, desperate to rid myself of it, and scowled. “Fuck. Aye. I ken it now. The angel Gabriel’s call...it’ll raise the dead, Joanie. Send the living to their graves, too.”

“Why didn’t he just kill me outright, then?” Joan’s cheeks were already pale, but at my words, the rest of the color drained out quick. “It would have been easier.”

“Yer, ah...special, I s’pose ye could say.” More precious than anything else I’d ever known—but of course, I couldn’t tell her *that*. Not yet. Not without giving everything else away. “There are different kinds of dead, ye see. Some more permanent than others. Gabriel’s herald...”

I turned my head away slightly and closed my eyes so she couldn’t see the pain on my face. If Joan had died in a normal way, she would have only reincarnated. Same as she always did.

If that had been the case, all I would’ve had to do was bide my time until I could find her again.

But with Gabriel’s trumpet beckoning her soul from her body, he’d certainly complicated things.

Her soul would go to him once she’d passed. And if he found some way to trap it—to take her out of her reincarnation cycle for good—then there wouldn’t be a second chance for us.

She’d be gone for good.

“Talk to me, Lock,” Joan whispered. “Tell me what we’re dealing with.”

“He’s tryin’ to claim yer soul, lass.” It was the simplest way I could explain it without giving up too much information right now. “Yer only a human still. Ye may be my wife, but yer soul is still unclaimed on a more, ah...cosmic sense.” If she loved me, it would be different. She’d be mine, and no one else would be able to claim her at all. It was why Gabriel had cornered us so quickly, must’ve been. He didn’t want to risk the chance that she’d fall for me again. “He’s callin’ ye to him, so he can have ye under his control.”

“Oh.” She panted. Her eyes focused and focused as she lay back. “Yeah. Fuck, then. Fuck.”

She took my hand from the small of her back and pulled it to her heart. Her fingers smoothed over my knuckles, flattening my palm against her bare breast. Her nipple was stiff against my lifeline.

I could feel every slow, aching beat of her pulse resonate in her chest.

“If I keep feeling like this, Lock...” Her eyes sought out mine. In the darks of her irises, there was pleading. “I don’t want to die.” She forced a smile I knew she didn’t feel. “Shitty way to end a wedding day.”

Tears in my eyes, I found myself smiling just as sadly back at her. She was right. With every moment that passed, her heart rate was dropping. Beneath the heat of my hand, her skin was so cold, I could feel steam beginning to form between us.

“Keep talking to me,” she whispered to me. Her hand tightened over mine. Through my fingers, she squeezed her breast and, against my own better judgment, my cock grew stiff in response. “I can feel the pull but... but it’s not as strong when I hear you. When I can feel you. I don’t know why.”

I swallowed hard.

I knew why. I knew exactly why.

Somewhere between us, even without her memories, the lingering marks of the love we’d lost must have been within her still. Something so powerful, not even the angels had managed to steal it away.

“Ye need to ground yerself on somethin’,” I told her. “Somethin’ that keeps ye here. Does...does the sound of my voice help wi’ that?”

“It does,” she admitted. “But...I think I need something more than just your voice to hold onto, Lock.”

My chest was tight. It would have been so easy to give her memories back here and now. If she recalled the love we’d had before those memories were taken, maybe it would have been enough to save her.

It was our best chance—a good enough one that I was tempted to forget my reservations against doing such a thing. To betray my own vows against it, as well.

But she was weak already. Striking her with all of her memories now would be so much for her to take—and it was likely to do just as much harm as it did good.

That little piece of her love for me that was still inside her. That was what we'd have to cling to now.

Maybe it would be enough.

"I need more of you," she rasped, staring up at me. "Will you...can you give me that, Lock?"

"And what more do ye want of me, lass?"

There was a new look in her eyes. I knew it well.

"I think you already know."

I did. I could see it in her, feel it rising up off of her skin. I could smell it on her. If I dared to lower my lips to hers, I knew I'd be able to taste it as well.

Want. Need. Longing. Lust.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck my entire life.

For her to ask that of me—to ask it of me *now*—

"I can't lose ye, Joanie," I whispered down to her, shaking my head. "But what yer askin' of me..."

I wanted her too. I truly did. I'd wanted her from the moment I first laid eyes on her outside of Paradise, bathed in neon, both of us spoiling for a fight. It was a longing that hadn't abated ever since.

Even now, as her life faded away beneath me, I wanted her still.

But damn the angels—I'd wanted her cleanly. Willing. Without all these threads of fate threatening to either pull us together out of sheer necessity or, if they were denied, to rend us apart.

I wanted her—but I hadn't wanted her like *this*.

"You're so warm, Lock." With what felt like the last fragments of energy in her tired body, she cuddled closer to me. "When you touch me... I feel it here. In my heart. You're holding me together. I don't know why—but you are."

I knew why. Knew damn well.

I may not have vowed out loud to love her, but I had to the Almighty. I'd said it with my own heart, and somehow, she'd heard it in hers.

She heard it still. Even now.

"It's so cold like this. So dark. And you...you're the only heat left in the world. The only light. The only way out." Her hips pressed against my thigh. I knew there, within the dark curls that covered her cunt, I'd find a redemption and the scent of fresh rain. "Save me, Lock. Bring me back."

“I want to, lass.” My will was straining. Pulled taut. Tearing at the seams. Did she want me because she wanted me, or only because this was the only way to save her life? “And if ye want me to, I will. But...I dinnae ken if ye’ll like it. I dinnae want to force ye—it isn’t right. Dinnae want to hurt ye, either. Yer fragile enough already. There must be some other—”

She shut me up with a quick, hard kiss. Another squeeze of my hand over her breast. She was cold, and she was fading, and yet she still knew exactly how to set my world aflame.

“Make me like it, then.” She pulled back and closed her eyes, nuzzling the tip of my nose with the edge of hers. “I can take it. I want it. I want you.”

My entire existence caught fire in an instant at her words. She’d soaked my soul in gasoline and tossed a match.

I kissed her again, crushed her lips beneath mine. Moved them like their friction could impart some of my warmth into her skin. I kissed her, and I burned.

I burned for her.

JOAN

He shifted my body onto the mattress and placed his hands on me like I was holy.

I was pretty sure I wasn't. From the sounds of things, I was just...*dying*. I heard Lock's fear of it in his voice. I felt the ache of it in my frozen, slowing heart.

But the way he touched my body, firm but gentle—so hungry and yet, so chastely profound...

If I closed my eyes and ignored the chill in my chest, I could imagine being the woman Lock saw me as. Fierce and capable. A fighter. A winner.

It was the woman I'd been right up until the whistle of that angel had caught me off guard.

Now, I could feel that hollow trumpet's call pulling me out of my own body. With every moment that passed, my limbs got heavier and my soul felt more spent.

I was slipping away, and the caress of Lock's hands across my skin was the real, vital thing left in my world.

"Stay with me, mo chridhe." He took my ribs in his hands. His broad palms and long fingers were big enough, he could almost wrap them all the way around me. "I've got ye. I'm here."

I felt like a broken doll he'd picked up off the street to put back together again.

I needed his touch. It was the only thing keeping me from falling apart.

“Ye’ve no right bein’ this beautiful right now.” Lock moved his hand up my body and, with only a moment of hesitation and a low growl, took my breasts into his grasp next. He kneaded them gently, then rough. It stirred a flutter into my heart—proof that what he was doing might just work. “Fuck’s sake, Joan...I’d forgotten—”

“Forgotten?” I rasped. What had Lock forgotten? Looking the way he did...surely it hadn’t been very long since the last time he’d seen a woman’s breasts.

“I mean, I’ve never seen nipples so rosy before,” he explained. “I...”

He stared down at them in the low light, then shook his head and licked his lips.

“I need to taste them, Joanie.”

Need to? Or want to? I wanted to ask him. But the truth was, I didn’t care.

The lines between the two were blurred for me already.

I needed Lock’s touch and his mouth and the heat of his body to save me.

I wanted him because he was rugged and handsome and kind. Because he was my husband now, and because now, regardless of the circumstances, I was his wife.

He licked my nipple first. His slick, velvety tongue pressed down flat against the curve of my breast, lapping upward. He flicked his tongue against the peak to quickly pin it, then released.

I gasped and struggled to raise my arms. I wanted my fingers in his hair. I wanted to drag my nails against his skin, mark his shoulders, relish the shifting bulk of his muscles beneath my fingertips.

I wanted to feel something. Anything. Anything other than this cold and this slow, sinking dread.

Dying, as it turned out, hurt.

But with Lock’s mouth latched tight on my breast and his warm, hard body pressed close to mine...

If he wasn’t saving my life, at least he made dying hurt a lot less.

“Spread yer legs.” He released my nipple with a soft *pop!* and growled the order into my breasts as he buried his face between them. He was panting. Every time he inhaled, I could feel him pulling in the scent of my skin. Like a beast tracking his prey. “I need yer cunt next.”

There was that word again. *Need*. I knew that I needed it too—every time he placed his mouth on me, his warmth passed through my skin and radiated into the cold, coiled knot in my core.

He needed to do this to keep me from death's door. I could feel it. That was true.

But beneath that, there was another need. A carnal one. No different than the need to breathe air, to eat, to drink—

The need to take and fuck and lay claim to what was his.

All of Hell belonged to Lock. And now, so did I.

I parted my knees for him without hesitation and he moved between them.

“Chrissakes,” he swore, spreading my folds apart with his fingers. “How the fuck are ye already that wet?”

I knew exactly how. I might have been dying, but my body seemed to be equally focused on having one last hurrah before I drew my final breath.

I wanted him. Needed him. Every inch of me was desperately clinging to life in the hope that need would be met.

Without another word, his lips descended on my pussy. He kissed it with his tongue, just as passionately as he'd kissed me before the altar after we'd said our vows. His licks were eager and hungry, roaming between my folds then slicking up to focus on my clit.

I gasped as he pressed the flat of his tongue against the sensitive bud. My entire body spasmed. Finally, my arms moved—this time of their own accord. I took advantage of the sudden opportunity to guide my fingers to his hair. I raked my fingertips against his scalp, then twisted his waves tight.

I needed something to hold onto, and Lock was the only thing left to cling to at all.

As he pinned my clit and began massaging it in circles, I clenched my eyes shut tight. As soon as they were closed, I could see my predicament much more clearly.

My body was here in bed with Lock, yes. But the rest of me—my spirit? My soul?—was moving rapidly down a long, dark tunnel with a light at the end of it.

I had a feeling I knew where that tunnel led.

It definitely wasn't anywhere I wanted to go.

But with every flick of Lock's tongue against my clit, new bursts of brightness flickered across my vision around my peripherals. I clutched at his hair, and my journey down the tunnel seemed to slow.

Meanwhile, my heart skipped beats as he increased his pace, like it was trying to catch up to the rhythm that he set.

I was dying, but in that moment, my body felt very much alive.

When he caught my clit at just the right angle, my muscles spasmed again. This time, my legs wrapped around him, curling around his head and hugging him tight. With my hold on his hair, I pulled him harder against my cunt.

Breathing didn't feel any easier now, but it felt different. I panted for him, whimpered and mewled and then, finally, as he sucked my clit between his lips and held it suctioned there between his teeth, I moaned.

"Lock...fuck, Lock, please—" Cleverness and eloquence were escaping me, but so was the chill in my bones. With every lash of Lock's tongue against me, a wave of heat washed over my body, driving out the cold.

I was drifting away, and the only thing keeping me here was the sensation of his beard tickling against my inner thighs and the heat of his mouth between my legs.

He was my anchor. My salvation. There was only one thing that was keeping me tethered to my own body right now, and it was the feeling of *him*.

My eyes rolled back as he savored me. He was growling, low and animalistic. When he'd promised to save me, I'd made the mistake of assuming he'd be gentle about it.

This was tender. It was delicious and comforting and, yes, even grounding—but it wasn't gentle. Not in the least.

It was rough and wild and intense.

His fingers slipped against my pussy again, this time delving deep. He pressed one into me and earned another breathy moan from my lips as he stroked upwards against my inner walls. It made me throb—not just in my pussy, but throughout my whole body. My skin tingled with excitement and elation. My heart was beating again—only now, it beat for him.

He withdrew his finger, only to add another when he entered me again. Pleasure roared inside me as he spread them apart, testing how far he

could stretch them before another spasm of my cunt forced them back together again.

His growls vibrated through me like the same vibrations that could make a crystal goblet sing until it shattered.

I was close. But I needed him closer still.

“P-please...” My lips wanted to make words, but I didn’t know how to arrange them into sentences anymore. All I could manage was the energy to beg—to beg him for release, and moan his name. “Lock... Oh, fuck! Lock!”

I arched for him. I pulled his hair and bit my lip and breathed his name like a prayer. There was a wave rising within me, and when it finally broke—

It all came crashing down, devastating and hard.

My knees clenched tight against the sides of Lock’s head. They were shaking violently, completely out of control. Bliss fluttered up through my core and rushed through my veins, electric and hot.

Behind my eyelids, I could see the light at the end of the tunnel still. I knew what was beyond that light—a place for my soul beyond the confines of my body. Heaven, Hell or otherwise. Still, I walked a path only traversed by the dying. The soon-to-be dead.

But there was a fork in that path now. Another way.

Another light, drawing rapidly nearer with every breath I took.

My orgasm hit me light a freight train. It knocked me back, all the way from the threshold of death and entirely into my body once more.

I threw my head back and let out a cry of gratification on every exhale. My chest was tight, and the same time, my entire body felt like it had just been freed from some impossible set of chains.

I saw bursts of radiance, like exploding stars. I saw the chilling darkness in my soul fade away, only to be replaced with warmth and glory and brightness once more.

I saw—

I saw Lock on a battlefield, kilted and roaring. In his hands, he held a broadsword. There was green fire ablaze in his eyes. An armored rider galloped toward him on horseback. The air hissed as the rider’s mace swung around in a violent arc, but Lock sent a ball of flame at him before he could get close enough to use his weapon.

I saw a sword in my own hands, dripping with blood. As the rider rose from the grass, still smoldering from Lock's attack, I launched myself at him with a deadly fury. My heartbeat pounded in my head beneath my helmet. My muscles burned with a delicious exhaustion that drove me onward as my blade connected with the chain of the rider's mace.

The chain wrapped around my sword, giving me leverage. I ripped the mace from the rider's hands, sending him stumbling away as he tried in vain to hang on.

He tripped right into Lock's sword. I saw Lock bury it deep in the man's gut. I heard the death cry.

I saw a volley of arrows that Lock burned to ash in the sky with a wave of his hand. I saw an army fall, retreat, then surrender. Not ours—the other side.

I saw love in Lock's eyes as he kissed me when it was done. I saw the blood on his hands—the blood on mine—and it was so much more than just seeing, because I could feel it.

This body was mine, and it wasn't.

Lock had fought for me. Killed for me. He'd been in love with me—but I wasn't me at all.

As the vision passed, my ears were still pounding. Adrenaline rushed through my veins, panging and sharp. It mingled with the dull, searing ache of my orgasm like two churning tides, lifting me up then pulling me back down into the dark.

He'd saved me. I was alive.

But in the aftermath...

What had he left me with in the wake of death?

"Lock?" My body was warm again, but a new worry had taken root within me now.

"Joan." He breathed my name against my thigh as he nuzzled it roughly, like he was trying to mark me with his scent. "Fuck, Joan..."

What was that, that I just saw? I wanted to ask him. There were so many questions I needed answers to. Chief among them now, the true nature of the vision that had just flooded my mind as Lock made me come.

I could still smell the sweet breeze of that field I'd seen Lock fighting on. On my tongue, I could still taste the coppery tang of blood.

But as I tried to find the right way to describe what had just happened, I found that I couldn't. My brain was struggling to piece two thoughts

together coherently. My body was more tired than it had ever been in all my life.

“Are ye with me, Joan?” Lock shifted his body over mine. The weight of him was a comfort. Like having a nice, heavy blanket tucked over me on a cold, dark night.

“I’m with you,” I whispered back to him. “I’m alive. I’m here.”

“Good.” Lock wrapped me up into his arms and rolled over on the mattress. He pulled my small body tight against his broad, firm chest and rubbed the roughness of his beard against my cheek. “Cannae lose ye, mo leannan. No again.”

I felt safe in Lock’s arms. Weary, but protected. My heart may have been beating again, but the rest of me was spent.

I was too tired to fight how good it felt to be held by him—by my husband—there in the dark. Too tired to ruin this moment.

I closed my eyes and cuddled a little closer into his embrace.

Whatever I’d seen, I’d deal with it in the morning. Right now, I didn’t have the energy in my body or the presence in my mind.

In the morning, I’d get my answers.

But for tonight, I was alive and safe and in Lock’s arms.

He’d rescued me. Pulled me back from the brink of death.

For tonight, that was enough.

LOCK

It wasn't often that I woke up with a knife to my throat. Not impossible, mind. I'd made plenty of enemies in my time.

But uncommon enough that, when my eyes snapped open to the cold press of a blade to my Adam's apple and Joan's pretty face scowling down at me, I had to blink a couple of times just to make sure that I wasn't having some kind of bad dream.

It certainly felt real enough.

"Hell's bells, Joanie." My voice was low and scratchy from sleep still. My reluctance to speak too loudly, lest the knife slip the wrong way, only added to the effect. "Where the fuck did ye get a knife?"

"Not a knife. A letter opener. From the desk." She cocked her head to the side, gesturing with it. "But don't think for a moment that it's any less dangerous for as long as it's here in my hand."

At Joan's explanation, my eyes trailed over to the writing desk in the corner.

That...checked out, I supposed.

But my questions for her in that moment were far from done.

"Right. Well..." I shifted my hips slightly. Joan was obviously angry with me about something, but the reality of our current situation was equally pressing. Joan was straddling me, dressed in yet another short nightgown—and I hadn't exactly woken up soft between the legs. Even as she held me at knifepoint—more or less—my cock was hard between her

thighs. Distracting. More so than her little knife. “Is there a reason ye’ve got a letter opener against my throat, then?”

“No.” Joan rolled her eyes. “I’m just doing this for fun.”

I sighed. It was almost a shame she was being sarcastic.

We’d fucked after sparring often enough before she’d lost all memory of me. This was almost enough to bring back a little wistful horniness for me. Our current positioning was reminiscent of better times.

Better to have my cock buried in her sweet cunt than to have a letter opener buried in my neck, at least.

“All right. What’s wrong, lass? Ye can tell me.” I arched an eyebrow. “Is this about last night?”

Last night. A set of words that contained so much more meaning than their definitions implied. I licked my lips and found I could still taste her need on my tongue. The squeeze of her thighs against my hips was warm now; her coldness had faded.

Her blood was up again. Somewhere beneath that thin little nightgown of hers, I knew, her heart was beating strong.

She’d asked me to save her with my body. I had. I’d lapped at her sex, thrummed my tongue against her clit, made her come. Brought her back to me.

But now, in the light of morning—had it all been at too great a cost?

“It is,” she said, and my heart took a tumble in my chest. Fuck. I’d done my best to make sure she wanted it. She’d said she had. In the moment, it had seemed like the only way. But this knife business now—was that the product of regret?

I didn’t deserve her. Even now that she wore my ring—I was no longer the man she’d once wanted. Once loved.

“Aye, well...I’m sorry, Joanie. I shoulda...shoulda come up with a better solution. I ken it was a...” I tore my gaze from her. “A harrowing sort of thing for ye.” I tried to keep my gaze on anything but her. Anything so I didn’t have to see the look of hate in her eyes. So I might remember what last night’s pleasure looked like again. But Joan was magnetic, and my eyes were iron filaments. Her pull was too strong. I looked up at her again. Cursed myself for it. “Do ye want me to go?”

“What?” Her own stare was a cocktail of annoyance and confusion. “No. I don’t want you to go, Lock. That isn’t...I don’t regret last night. Not at all. I asked you for it, didn’t I?” This time, she was the one who

looked away. A pink tinge rose up on her cheeks, like blooming roses. Far too cute. “I liked it, Lock. That’s not what this—” she pressed the knife against me a little harder— “Is about.”

“Then what in the hell *is* it? Fuck’s sake, Joanie! Just tell me what I’ve done to ye!”

“It’s not something you did, Lock. Or...maybe it is.” Joan’s chest deflated with a heavy sigh. “Something weird happened last night. When you were...you know. When we were in bed together.”

“I swear to Christ, Joanie, if this is about the orgasm—” I could be a bastard, I knew, but this was the first time I’d had any complaints in that department.

“It isn’t about...” Joan glared down at me. “Will you just let me explain?”

“I’d love to, lass,” I said agreeably. “But to do that, ye’ll need to use yer words. Why are ye tryin’ to stab me?”

“I’m not trying to stab you. I’m trying to get your attention.”

“Well...” I glanced down. “Ye’ve got it.”

Joan gnawed on her lip for a moment, then backed the knife away. Just a little bit. “I saw...a vision last night, maybe. A memory?” She shook her head. “I’m not sure what it was. But I need to know, and you’re going to tell me.”

“Describe it to me.” My gaze turned serious in an instant. I set my jaw. Had she seen our life together before I’d lost her, maybe? Or—god forbid—the moment I’d lost her altogether. It would explain why she was so pissed, anyway. I hoped for the best and braced myself for the worst. “Tell me what ye saw.”

“You,” she said, and my heart kicked a horseshoe. “And me.”

“I see. And what were you and me doin’?” I had to try hard not to hold my breath.

“Fighting, I think. Like we were last night. Only, we weren’t in Vegas. We were...somewhere else. Europe, I think.” She raked a hand through her hair and pressed her fingertips to her scalp, like she was trying to pull the scene from her mind. “We were wearing armor. Riding on horseback. *You*—” She shifted the knife— “had a kilt on.”

“Did I now?” I wasn’t surprised. If we’d been anywhere but Vegas for our wedding, I would’ve had one on last night, too. Bit of a shame, really.

But for the moment, my greatest worries about Joan's so-called vision were abated.

She hadn't remembered us. Not as we'd been in this life.

It was a relief, in a way.

I had my reasons for wanting to keep her in the dark about the time we'd shared before. Some selfish. Some good and true.

I wanted her to love me because she loved me—not because the weight of our pasts drew her to me with its gravity.

From all the rest...I wanted to keep her safe.

Sometimes here in Hell, the more you knew, the worse things got.

"It was...weird, Lock." Joan shook her head. "I can't make sense of it."

I stared up at her. Her fierce beauty. The uncertainty that cut through it, far more effective than any letter opener wielded as a knife.

"Ye shared a bed with a fallen angel in Hell last night, lass," I told her. "Before that, ye nearly died. A little weirdness is to be expected, don't ye think?"

"Fair," Joan admitted. "But...was it one of my memories? One of yours?"

"Did it feel like one of your memories?"

"In the moment...it did, yeah. But I...I didn't feel like me, either. I was myself, and at the same time...I wasn't." She tilted her head to the side and eased her letter opener away from my throat. "Do you remember anything like that?"

I took a moment to answer. I would need to choose my next words with care. Lest this all fell apart right here, right now.

"I do, aye. A long time ago." I closed my eyes, drawing my own memories of Joan on the battlefields to my mind. I smelled the smoke, the flames, the death. On my lips, I could still taste her kisses in the thin light of morning afterward. Sweet relief mixed with blood. "I've fought side by side with many women throughout the ages, Joanie. All fierce warriors. All an awful lot like you." Exactly like her, actually.

They'd all been Joan in a past life. Every single woman I'd ever wanted, bedded, loved—they were all her.

Though, I couldn't properly tell her *that* just yet.

"Oh." Joan's face fell slightly. "I thought, last night before everything went sideways... I thought that we were a good team, fighting together the way we did. Weren't we?"

“We were.” Throughout all her lifetimes, she still hadn’t lost her touch. “We are.”

“It felt...special.” Joan’s cheeks were picking up color again. She was cute flushed. Even when she was continuing to hold me at knife point. Especially then. “It made *me* feel special. Is this your way of telling me that I’m not?”

I couldn’t help myself.

I laughed.

“Oh, yer special all right.” The most precious thing I’d ever known. Unrivaled. Unparalleled. Throughout hundreds of her lifetimes and the thousands of years I’d been alive myself—the only woman I’d ever loved. “I dinnae go marrying every lass I see now, do I?”

“I don’t know,” Joan countered. “I don’t know anything about you at all.”

“Well...p’raps we should set about tryin’ to fix that, then.” I glanced down at her knuckles, still curled around the letter opener. “Might be easier if ye get yer wee weapon off my jugular, mind.”

“Oh. Right.” Seemingly mollified—for the moment, at least—Joan lowered the letter opener. Then, slowly, she moved off my hips. Released my body. I ached for her all the more when she was gone. “Sorry. I...that was a bit of an overreaction, I guess.”

“Dinnae fash yerself,” I said with a chuckle. “No about to complain about having ye on my lap, am I?”

I moved to the vanity and hunched over it. When I tilted my head back and looked in the mirror, I could see the imprint Joan’s little threat had left on my neck beneath my beard. Red skin, a little raw but no blood. To the side of my neck, I found a deep bruise in the shape of Joan’s mouth. A hickey—a love bite, from where she’d sunk her teeth in and sucked at me last night.

I rubbed both places, first one, then the other, smirking.

I didn’t mind bearing Joan’s marks.

“How are ye feelin’ today, lass?” I glanced back at her through the mirror. She sat cross-legged on the bed now, watching me watch her. “No more cold?”

“Not since...well.” Joan rubbed the back of her neck, turning even more pink. *Not since you made me orgasm hard enough to bring me back from the dead*, I imagined her saying. A bad idea. Even just fantasizing

about those words coming from her lovely lips made my cock even stiffer. “Not since you saved me.”

“And yer other wounds?”

Joan raised her fingertips to her flushed cheek, brushing them over the shallow cut that Gabriel’s sword had left there.

“I’m all right. A little sore and bruised, but otherwise okay.” She lowered her hand. “So what’s the plan for today? You’re not going to make me sit in the spa all day again, are you?”

“Well...” I raked my fingers through my hair, trying to sort out the mess of my ruddy waves. “I promised ye I’d go see about Ava’s ma, didn’t I? Reckon unless the Covenant makes contact...” I glanced at her again. “Have they? To you, I mean.”

Joan reached over to the nightstand for her phone, checked it, and shook her head. “Nothing on my end. I’m assuming, since you’re asking, you haven’t heard anything either.”

“Not a peep,” I confirmed. “But I was thinking...ye could come with me, if ye wanted. See Ava and her ma for yourself. Help talk them into letting me try to help.”

Keeping my demonic nature from Ava and her mother wouldn’t be the problem when it came to keeping my promise to Joan. Ava already knew about angels and demons through Bea. As for Ava’s mother...as I recalled, she wasn’t exactly the most normal of humans herself. Did a fair bit of witchery around that little flower shop of hers. A seventh daughter of a seventh daughter—much like Ava herself.

No, the problem would be convincing Ava’s ma that a demon might be willing to help at all.

“You’d let me?” Joan’s face lit up a little bit. “Thank you, Lock. That sounds...really nice.”

“Good. It’s a plan, then.” A half-baked one at best, but I’d already given her my word. Anything that made Joan cry was worth trying to sort out. Even if it was a small detour from our purposes here—until the Covenant gave us a little more information on this mission they had for us, we’d be sitting on our hands anyway. Better this way, to keep ourselves busy. “In that case, I reckon we shower—get some breakfast in us, rustle up some fresh clothes. Then we can head out.” I glanced to the bathroom. “Do ye want the first go, washin’ up, or do ye want to rest for a while longer yet?”

I knew what I would have preferred: showering together. Having Joan's small, tight body beneath the hot water, pressed up nice and firm against mine while I worked her over with my hands and some soap.

My cock leapt up at the thought. The matter of dealing with Ava's mother still filled me with a little uncertainty, but having Joan naked against me—*that* was a notion that both my brain and my body found entirely agreeable.

"It doesn't matter. But. Um." Joan shifted to her hands and knees, crawling to the edge of the bed. "I did have one more question, Lock. If you don't mind." She made a show of placing her letter opener aside and holding her hands up so I could see they were empty. "No threats this time. Promise."

I laughed. "Ask away, lass."

"Yesterday, when you said you had business out in Vegas before the wedding..." She arched a perfectly shaped black brow. "What exactly where you up to? We got so distracted, you never actually said."

I snorted. "Er...well."

After all that had happened, it was almost embarrassing to admit it now.

I'd imagined last night going an awful lot differently than it actually had.

My clothes from last night were still strewn across the floor. I moved to my trousers and dipped to rifle through their pockets.

"Here," I said, pulling it out. The silk was soft beneath my fingers. Around it was ruffled lace. I tossed it to her on the bed and it landed in her lap. "Bit silly now."

"Is this..." Joan picked it up and stretched it out. She stared at it for a moment with curiosity, then her body shook with an incredulous laugh. "A garter?"

"For after the wedding, aye." I rubbed the back of my neck, joining in her laughter. "I had some designs of, ah...getting it on ye, getting ye back here to our room, then—"

"Taking it back off?" Joan guessed. "Scandalous, Lock."

I glanced down at her bare legs beneath the hem of her nightie. They were lightly tanned and long for her frame. Well-muscled and slim. Like a dancer's legs.

“Put it on for me and I’ll take it back off ye still,” I offered. Gave her a little snap of my teeth—I certainly hadn’t been planning on removing it with my fingers, after all.

“You’d like that, wouldn’t you?” Joan’s words might’ve been derisive, but her tone was promisingly playful.

“Aye.” I took a step closer. My mouth went wet. My pulse picked up with keen interest. “I would.”

“Yeah?” Joan stuck out a leg and reached down, looping the garter around her ankle. “Then maybe I will.”

Something hitched in my chest as she slid the garter up her calf. The creamy white silk and lace created a lovely contrast against the soft tan of her skin. Every inch of her that the garter touched, I touched for myself in my mind’s eye.

By the time she had it settled around her upper thigh, my cock was stiffening again. It had hardly gone down from waking up with her on my lap; now, it was swelling with a brand-new interest.

“There,” Joan said, snapping the elastic against her skin. Her eyes were full of challenge as she stared up at me. “Is that what you wanted?”

I licked my lips. Nodded. Took another step forward. “Aye. Aye, it was.”

“And what are you going to do about it now?”

Slowly, I smiled. Another step forward.

“Already told ye, didn’t I?” I cracked my knuckles. Another step. Another. “I intend to pull it off.”

“It’s a little silly to put something on just to take it back off,” Joan pointed out.

“Maybe so. But I enjoyed watching ye put it on.” I put a knee on the mattress and crawled toward her. She made me feel like a predatory animal. Something hungry and wolfish. A beast. “Imagine I’ll enjoy removin’ it even more.”

“Pleasure for pleasure’s sake.” Joan lay back, propping herself up on her elbows. “Is that what kind of man you are?”

I paused, my lips hovering just an inch over her ankle. “Honestly, Joanie?”

“Yes, Lock?”

“I dinnae ken what kind of man I am anymore,” I admitted. She had no idea how deep that question of hers ran. “But yer my wife now, and I’m

yer husband. Even if it's only for a little while. Reckon if it gives me pleasure, tearin' bits of silk and lace off of ye with my teeth..." I pulled her ankle up to my lips and gently bit just above it, at the delicate curve of her calf. I pressed a kiss over it. "Doesnae matter who I am. Only matters that ye like it."

"Mm." Joan stretched her leg out a little more. Her eyes were dark and glimmering with a kind of delight as she tilted her chin up. A challenge. A go-ahead. "So far...what's not to like?"

My shoulders tensed as I lowered my lips to her skin once more, a little higher up her calf now. It would've been far too easy to pin her down and claim every inch of her with my mouth. I could've fallen upon her ravenously in that moment. Worshiped her. Devoured her—a man starved of light and sustenance for so long, finally brought up out of the depths of Hell to feast in the sun.

I held myself back, though. Joan deserved my focus. My restraint.

I wanted to savor every kiss I gave her.

I wanted to draw every moment with her out into infinity. Make every second count.

I knew far too well how quickly fate could turn against us. Transform precious times like these into our last.

I kissed up her thigh, flicking my tongue against her skin and grazing her with my teeth as I went. Joan sighed softly with each kiss. Sometimes, she even purred.

When I reached the garter, it took every ounce of restraint in my bones to keep me from ripping it apart between my teeth like a hungry wolf. Delicately, I bit the lace into my mouth. Pulled it down, and—

A knock sounded at the door. Joan's eyes shot open in an instant, meeting mine.

"Should you get that?" she whispered. She didn't sound like she wanted me to.

It was good we were in agreement. I didn't want to, either.

"Let 'em knock," I said through my teeth. "They can wait. This can't."

Joan relaxed back and I started to pull the garter back down once more. My pulse was thunder rumbling through my chest. It reverberated in my ears. My cock was hard, stiff like it had been run through with lightning, and between Joan's thighs, I could smell her cunt soaking itself with want. The scent of a sweet, clean summer rain.

Another knock. This time, a curt, urgent one.

My eyes met Joan's again. I held her gaze for a moment, then growled with annoyance.

Fuck's sake.

"Right." I patted her thigh as I rose, bristling. "Stay right there. Back in a sec."

I opened the door with a scowl. Behind it was Charon, dressed in his butler's tux.

"Package for you," he said, handing me a sizable black box tied with gold ribbon. Beneath the ribbon, a card was tucked.

I pulled it out and turned it over. Written on it in heavy script—a message:

Moloch and Joan,

Congratulations on your nuptials. Your next orders are inside.

— The Covenant

"Thank ye, Charon." I did my best to mean it. I liked Charon. He was a good man. *Don't shoot the messenger*, as the saying went.

"You're most welcome, Your Majesty." Charon bowed, then backed away. "Good luck."

"What's up?" Joan asked. She was still poised on the bed with the garter on her thigh. "Special delivery?"

I had a long look at her with a thousand thoughts of what I'd like to do next running through my mind, each of them dirtier than the last.

And I wouldn't get to do a single one of them.

Fuck me.

"Change of plans," I said with a sigh. I placed the box on the bed and handed her the card. "Looks like your Covenant has other ideas for how we ought to spend our day."

JOAN

The box contained a set of casual clothes for both of us, a deck of cards, and an invitation to play poker in Avarice later that night. After we opened it, Lock and I set about taking turns showering and getting dressed.

The mood, unfortunately, had been ruined.

I knew the faster we consummated our marriage, the faster I would have the tools I needed to protect myself here in Hell. Having sex with Lock would be more than just sex; it was necessary to seal whatever sacred agreement Heaven and Hell saw marriage as. It would give me access to Lock's powers, too.

We had no idea what the Covenant would put us up against as we continued to fulfill the mission they'd tasked us with. We still had no idea what they wanted from us, what they'd ask for next—or even what it was they were planning on having us steal from Hell.

We didn't even know who we'd be gambling with tonight.

What we did know from the invitation was a time—9:00 p.m.—and a dress code: black tie.

"I don't see why they couldn't have just sent clothes for tonight up for us," I grumbled as Lock led me out of the elevator. Our first stop of the day was Indulgence on the Inferno's third floor. As far as I could tell, it was essentially a luxury shopping mall featuring clothing and outfits from

every period of history. “They had no problem deciding for us what they wanted us to wear today.”

My Covenant-mandated outfit for the day consisted of a brown suede miniskirt, a black Bardot top, and black kitten heels with straps around the ankles. It was a little girly for my tastes, but it fit me perfectly.

Everything that the Covenant sent me to wear always did.

“Maybe they want us to get to know each other better,” Lock mused. He was dressed in a pair of jeans, a tight black t-shirt, and boots. He looked—well, he looked handsome. But he didn’t appear to be feeling any more inspired by the Covenant’s new task for us than I was. “I’m sorry we’re stuck doin’ this instead of visitin’ yer Ava, lass. I promise—tomorrow we’ll go see to it straight away. Ye have my word.”

“I do, don’t I?” It felt strange to admit it. But so far, Lock seemed like a man of his word. He hadn’t forgotten his promise to help. Ever since he’d given it to me, I hadn’t even needed to be the one to bring it up. “Fancy that. A demon I can trust.”

“Course ye can. Told ye that already, didn’t I? Am no really the lyin’ type.”

Lock led me past a shop filled with pelts and furs. Part of me wanted to drag him into it and pick out barbarian outfits for this evening. The Covenant had specified black tie—but they hadn’t said from what era. Showing up to Avarice in caveman formal certainly would have turned some heads.

“And...you really believe that the Covenant is working against humanity.” As we passed two whispering women who looked like they’d stepped straight out of the pages of *Pride and Prejudice*, I wound my arm around Lock’s and lowered my voice. They stared and giggled at us behind their hands as they walked by. “What makes you think that I can’t trust them?”

“Well, the fact that they’re drip-feeding us information, for a start,” Lock said. “This *go-fetch-yerselves-outfits* business feels like busywork, does it no?”

“It does,” I agreed. It was an annoyance, having to go shopping for work when we could have been healing Ava’s mother. An unnecessary one, at that. We were here for a heist—not for a silly late-night poker game. “But you said we couldn’t trust them before they sent us on errands today.”

“True. And I meant it,” Lock said with a nod. “I know who yer employers really are, lass. I imagine they’re who we’ll be meeting tonight—and I think once ye do, ye’ll understand exactly why they don’t deserve a lick of your confidence. They certainly don’t have any of mine.”

“Who are they?” There was a toga shop on our right and some sort of Victorian-era BDSM boutique on our left. This place truly had anything—though, I hadn’t yet spotted a single outfit that would be right for the task at hand. “I did some research on them myself, you know. Didn’t turn anything up at all.”

“That’s because ye weren’t supposed to. People like them—they don’t operate on the radar, do they?”

“No. I suppose they wouldn’t.” Mysterious secret organizations—the real ones—rarely did, I supposed.

“The Covenant is run by Adversary Industries. Recently merged with Leviathan Financial. Ye’ve heard of them, I trust.”

“Leviathan? That’s Bea’s family’s company.” I frowned. “I didn’t realize there’d been a merger. Does this have anything to do with Bea’s husband? With Don?”

“Nah, lass. Don’s on our side. That merger...it wasnae supposed to happen. The result of evil forces at work.”

“Literally, huh?” Lock certainly knew how to turn a phrase.

He laughed mirthlessly. “Aye. A good joke. Now, Leviathan—the man, not the company—he’s a fallen angel. Ye heard me mention him to Gabriel last night.”

“And I saw his reaction, too.” What kind of being struck fear into the hearts of heavenly beings? A powerful one, certainly.

If this Leviathan person was really pulling the strings, Lock was right. I’d been played.

“He didnae join up with the rest of us Fallen in Hell,” Lock explained. “Went his own way. He’s been meddlin’ about on Earth ever since. Has his own powers, y’see. He’s a creature all his own. That makes him dangerous. For me, for you—for all of creation. He wants to destroy it all—and he’s a man accustomed to gettin’ what he wants.”

“Is that who we’ll be playing cards with tonight, then? Leviathan?” I thought back to the letter opener that I’d discovered back up in our room. It wasn’t a very good weapon, but if I could get close enough to Leviathan while he was nice and distracted...

“Lass,” Lock warned. He must have seen the murderous look in my eyes—or maybe, he could read my mind. “Ye don’t wannae go fuckin’ about wi’ killin’ ancient entities. No until we get ye a weapon better than a wee knife made for openin’ mail.” Lock shrugged. “Besides. If I had to guess, I doubt he’ll turn up until he’s good and ready. We’ll be gamblin’ wi’ Beelzebub and Mammon tonight, most like. Other members of the Fallen. Ones that are less partial to humanity than I am.”

“And why *are* you so partial to humanity?” I asked. “If you’re king here, and all of your subjects want to end the world...”

“Pretty human lasses like you, of course,” Lock quipped. With a finger, he pointed me to our destination. Finally, a shop with actual dresses from this era in it. “Now. C’mon. Let’s get ye somethin’ to wear.”

MY IDEA of something to wear and Lock’s were obviously two very different concepts indeed.

“I’m not showing up in this, Lock.” I shoved the dress he’d chosen for me back at him. It was white with a thin strip of cloth down the middle and two connecting strips that I assumed would go across my breasts and my hips. The entire thing was almost see-through. “I’d be better off showing up in a thong and two band-aids over my nipples, for fuck’s sake.”

“Would ye like to wear that?” Lock arched an eyebrow. “It’d hardly be black tie, mind—but ye *would* turn heads.”

“I don’t want to turn heads,” I insisted. “I want to wear something...”

Something *what*? Proper? Modest? Classy? Elegant?

Anything but a dress that would dissolve the moment someone accidentally spilled a drink on me, at least.

“I ken what ye want,” Lock admitted. “But that isnae what we *need*.”

“I certainly don’t need *that*.” I gave the dress a final glare before Lock handed it off to a platinum blonde assistant, who rolled her eyes and carried it away.

“Maybe no. But ye’ll need something *like* that,” he assured me. “Flashy. Revealing and the like. We may need a distraction, see, and you lookin’ the way ye do...”

“Is this really for the benefit of the mission, Lock?” I narrowed my eyes at him. “Or is it for your own?”

Lock winked at me, then turned back to the racks. “Eh. Why can’t it be both?”

The shop’s attendants brought us two glasses of champagne while we continued working our way through the dresses on offer. All of the ones I liked were too sophisticated for Lock’s purposes, and all of the ones he liked were...well.

Pretty slutty, if I was being blunt.

“What exactly am I supposed to be distracting people from?” I asked as we discarded yet another option. I didn’t really think a low-cut corset the same color as my skin and a bondage-tight pencil skirt were really my style. Or practical.

Or, for that matter, black tie.

“Dunno yet,” Lock admitted. “Trouble. Cheatin’ demons. Fallen angels wi’ wanderin’ eyes. Yer a beauty, Joanie, and there’s nothin’ more distractin’ than a beautiful woman.” He held up yet another option. A simple black dress. Low-cut and short, but not *terrible*, at least. “Especially no in a dress like this.”

I cast a glance to the pile of discards—the shop attendants had barely been able to keep up with our ravaging of their inventory—and took a sip of my champagne for courage.

“I don’t see why *you* can’t be the distraction,” I grumbled as I traded him my glass for the dress. “Put you in one of those little Chippendale’s uniforms or something.”

“I’ll see if they’ve got one for me while ye try that on,” Lock said with a chuckle. “Ye have to admit, we’d be quite the pair, showin’ up dressed like that.”

I found myself laughing with him as I headed for the dressing rooms.

He wasn’t wrong.

We absolutely would.

Behind the velvet curtain of a stall, I stripped out of my skirt and top. A mere glance at the dress Lock had picked out for me told me that I’d have to lose the bra I was wearing, too.

As I folded the dress around myself, I caught sight of my body in the mirror. I was covered in bruises that I hadn’t even realized I’d amassed. Some were older, from past missions. Racing through ancient temples and rolling around in sacred dirt had done a real number on my knees.

Other bruises were fresh, though. Memories from our battle with the angels last night. If I let myself become aware of my own muscles and bones, I felt them aching from exertion.

Fighting with angels in front of a twenty-four-hour chapel run by a balding man in an Elvis costume. I had to admit—it had been one hell of a way to spend a wedding night.

When I went to grab the back of the dress so I could try to zip it back together again, I found that I couldn't quite reach it. My shoulders were too stiff and the way the zipper worked—it didn't seem like the kind of thing a woman was meant to get into on her own to begin with.

"Um..." I poked my head out through the curtain, scanning for an attendant who might be willing to take pity on me.

All I found waiting for me outside was Lock himself. All the pretty blondes who seemed to manage this place must have been busy rehangng all the other dresses we'd pulled off the racks.

"D'ye need help, lass?" Lock took a tentative step forward. "If ye want me to, I mean—"

I blinked at him, then gave a nod of defeat.

"Yes," I said with a sigh of relief. "I think if I keep trying on my own, this dress will kill me before I manage to get it zipped."

"Well, can't have that then, can we?" Lock moved to the curtain and took it from my fingers. "We want ye dressed to kill, aye—no killed by yer dress."

Inside the stall with me, Lock closed the curtain behind him. I was suddenly hyper-aware of exactly how naked I was.

If I faced him, he could see my ass in the mirror.

If I turned around...

I blushed as I stared up at him. My pulse was throbbing hard enough, I could feel it in my cunt.

I supposed he couldn't really zip me up unless I turned around.

"Dinnae worry, Joanie." Lock took my shoulder in his massive hand and turned my body for me. "I'll be a gentleman about it."

I held my breath as Lock reached for the zipper. In order to hold the dress together while he did it up, he had to place a hand on my ass in a way that I was, ah...

Not exactly opposed to.

The zipper whispered as Lock slid it up my back. His knuckles brushed against my spine the whole way. It was far too easy to imagine that we were just a normal married couple in that moment. Not preparing to gamble with fallen angels, but getting ready for a big date.

It was even easier to imagine that I wasn't wearing a dress at all.

"There." He settled the zipper up at its highest point. "All done."

I let the breath out.

I knew how close I'd just come to asking him for something else—something that would require Lock to take the dress right back off of me.

"Um. Wow." I blinked at my reflection. Even without a bra, my tits were pushed up in a way that made them look twice as big as they normally did. My waist looked impossibly tiny. My hips flared out wide, and my ass...

I turned to the side and nearly swallowed my tongue.

My ass looked *good*. Too good. Round and shapely and firm. A Kardashian would've wept out of envy.

"Ah." Lock nodded with approval as he looked me over as well. "That's...well, fuck. That's the one then."

"You think?" I could hardly believe my eyes. I was used to wearing tight, revealing dresses, of course. Not all of the places the Covenant had sent me were out in the middle of the jungle. Sometimes, I'd been directed to fancy auctions of ancient artifacts. Others, I'd been dropped on the doorsteps of drug dealers and dictators.

But out of all the outfits I'd had to put on to fulfill the Covenant's hunger for fabled objects of supposed power...

I hadn't worn anything that suited my body quite as well as this yet.

"Ye look...stunning," Lock breathed. He raised a hand to my bare shoulder blade and gently ran his fingers down my skin. His touch was warm, but it still made me shiver. "Canna believe yer actually mine."

"Is that what I am?" I whispered back to him. "Yours?"

In a dress like this...I had to admit, I truly felt like the King of Hell's bride.

"If ye weren't, I'd kill the man who ye belonged to instead," Lock professed. He looked serious about it.

Fuck. That...definitely shouldn't have made me feel as hot as it did.

"I bet you say that to all the girls," I mumbled, taking a small step away.

It wasn't that I didn't want him touching me.

In fact...no. The problem was quite the opposite.

I liked Lock's touches far too much.

He laughed in response. "What others?"

"You know. All the other women you've fought alongside throughout the ages." A group of women I was beginning to feel a little too jealous of. They'd probably met Lock on the battlefield. Fucked him there in the grass when they realized they were both still alive by the end of it.

Whereas, for me...

Everything felt a little more complicated than that.

Lock had gone down on me last night, sure. But that had been to save my life. He'd married me—but that was on the Covenant's orders. The very group of people he'd just explained to me I had no reason to trust.

If marrying Lock and spending all this quality time with him was exactly what the Covenant wanted...

Was it really a good idea for me to be so attracted to him? To want him? To be anywhere near him at all?

"Ye've no need to feel envy for those women, Joanie," Lock assured me. Essentially, calling me out.

My eyes must have turned positively green when I mentioned them. Or maybe I really was that obvious.

Lock did seem to have a way of figuring me out.

"Why not?" I couldn't deny my jealousy. Those women had been with Lock in far more intense ways than I had. They'd known all his moves. They'd fought at his side with our same symmetry. "Isn't it normal for a wife to be a little envious of all the other women her husband has fucked?"

Lock chuckled. "Ah, lass. If only ye knew." He patted me on the hip—almost a spank, really—then took a step toward the curtain. "Take it back off and I'll have the attendants bag it up for ye. Then, I s'pose we'll need to find me a tux—sort ye out a wee purse, some makeup..."

"Lock?" I said over my shoulder as he moved to step through the curtains once more.

He paused. "Lass?"

I gestured at my zipper. "Can you unzip me again? If I couldn't get it on by myself, I certainly can't get it off without help either."

"Ah." Lock stared at me for a long moment, then nodded. "Course I can."

He shifted behind me and placed a hand on my hip. In the mirror, I could see the concentration on his face as he took hold of the zipper's pull tab and, very slowly, pulled it all the way down to the dress' hem.

It fell to the floor once it was undone, leaving me standing there in only the black lace thong that the Covenant had provided me with for the day.

In the mirror, Lock was staring again. First, at my backside. A shiver rippled through my shoulder as I felt his gaze trail down my spine to focus on my ass.

Then, he looked up. His eyes traced the curves of my reflection, from my legs to my hips to my waist...

To my breasts.

I bit my lip. What did I do now? Did I smile at him? Wink? Do a cute little tap dance?

I could turn around and kiss him, I knew. After last night...I doubted he'd be opposed to the idea.

The feeling was becoming mutual. Now that I knew him a little better, I was less and less opposed to the idea of being Lock's wife—in every sense of the word—all the time.

"There ye are then, lass." Lock swallowed hard as his eyes met mine. "Unzipped."

His gaze dropped to my breasts again. For a moment, I was certain that he was going to reach around me and take it into his broad, rough hand.

Maybe I even would have liked that. We were married now, after all, and from last night...I knew Lock was good with his hands.

I could imagine it with vividness: his fingers, teasing my nipples. The warmth of his body behind mine. Maybe he'd bend me over and fuck me up against the mirror.

Maybe this time, when he made me come, I'd get to watch myself. Watch him.

"Is there anything else ye'll be needin', Joan?" Lock's voice was more ragged than it had been a moment ago.

Yes, I wanted to tell him. *Fuck me. Take me. Right here. Let's do this now.*

But something about the moment...

I lost my courage.

It didn't feel like the right time.

“No,” I breathed. “Thank you, Lock. You can go.”

He licked his lips, nodded once, and stooped to pick the dress up off the floor. A rustle of the curtain—

Then, he was gone.

I cupped my own breasts after he left. Moved to the mirror and rested my forehead against my own reflection. Breathed out on the glass until the steam fogged it up too much for me to see my own face.

Moloch. King of Hell. My husband.

Somehow, the only man in the entire universe I could trust right now.

I closed my eyes and felt a flash of envy toward that woman from my vision last night. Toward all the warrior women he’d shared battlefields with in the past.

He’d told me I was special—but was I? Was I really?

Or was I just another woman doomed to die in his arms?

I didn’t know. Had no way *to* know.

Part of me was afraid to find out.

LOCK

After we'd gotten everything together for our debut in Avarice later that night, I was starving. The rumbling of Joan's stomach told me she wasn't much better off.

I had our things sent back up to the room, then took her down to Limbo.

We'd earned a nice lunch before we set about preparing ourselves for the evening ahead of us—even if I knew what I really wanted was a nice, stiff drink.

I'd known when I signed myself up for this situation that there would be parts of it that would hurt. Joan didn't remember it yet, but I could hardly forget.

The last time we'd been together, I'd failed her. I hadn't been able to keep her safe. Keep her mine.

Without giving her memories, I knew that whatever we were building now was being constructed on the foundations of a lie—but there was no other way.

I couldn't risk her loving me now just because she'd loved me before. In losing her, I'd proven I wasn't the man she'd fallen in love with at all.

If she fell for me again, it would have to be for me. As I was now.

To avoid the lies of our past meddling with her heart, I had to keep this smaller lie here in the present.

Once I knew where her feelings truly lay...I'd come clean to her then.

Joan was still Joan, no matter what memories she'd lost.

I knew her better than I'd ever known anyone.

When I could finally lay all my cards on the table and explain myself, I knew she'd understand.

"Do ye want to see a wee trick?" At our table in Limbo while we waited for our food, I split the deck of cards the Covenant had sent us that morning exactly in two.

"Okay," Joan agreed with interest. "I'll bite."

"And how I love it when ye do." The upper half, I set aside. The lower half, I fanned out and offered to Joan. "So. Pick a card."

"Any card?" she teased, arching an eyebrow.

"Ah, see?" I grinned at her. "Ye've obviously done this before."

Joan plucked a card from the deck and held it against her chest. "Can I look at it?"

"Ye'll have to. How else will ye ken if I've guessed what it is?"

Carefully, Joan peeled the card away from her clavicle, glanced down at it, then hid it against her body once more.

"Okay. Now what?"

"Put it back in with the others. Anywhere ye want."

Joan slipped the card into place and I shuffled it up into the others a bit. Made a good show of mixing them all up with some flair.

"You're good at that," Joan commented as I bowed the deck at its edges and sent it flowing from one hand to another. As soon as she paid me the compliment, one of the cards flew out and floated back down to the table between us. Joan laughed. "Well. You're all right."

"Spent a lot of time on the battlefield. No much else to do while ye wait for the enemy to attack than tell old war stories and try to entertain each other," I explained. I reached for the card that had leapt from the rest and flipped it over. "Two of hearts. Is that yer card?"

"It's not, I'm afraid." She laughed again. "Maybe you're not so good at this after all."

"Aye, well, I'm tryin' my best, lass! Gimme a mo'." I tucked the two of hearts back in with the rest, then started separating the deck into three piles, flipping each card face up as I laid it down. "Now, keep an eye out for yer card when it shows up, but dinnae tell me which pile it's in just yet."

When all of the cards in my hand were regrouped into three piles, I glanced back up at Joan.

“Did ye see it?”

“I did,” she confirmed.

“And was it in, ah...” I guessed at random and pointed to the cards furthest to my right. “That pile?”

“No.” She offered me a sympathetic smile. Being nice, really. Or so she thought. She pointed to the cards on my left. “That one, I’m afraid.”

“Ach. Shite.” I picked up the cards in the middle first, then stacked the pile with Joan’s card in it between the other two as I regrouped. “Maybe I am a wee bit rusty at this. Lemme go again.”

“Your funeral.” Joan sat back and crossed her arms over her chest, looking amused by my bumbling antics.

Perfect.

I separated the cards out into three stacks again, repeating the trick. I guessed wrong again—Joan’s card was in the middle pile this time.

“I appreciate the effort, Lock.” She placed a hand over mine as I swore and moved to regather the cards once more. “But maybe card tricks aren’t really your forte.”

“Nah, just...one more go,” I grumbled. “I’m sure I remember how to do this. Just need a few more goes, p’raps. Bear with me?”

She shrugged, turning her face to hide her laughter. “You seem pretty dead set on this. I’m not sure you’re giving me a choice.”

My third attempt, of course, failed as well. I could feel her pity for me growing. I played my own frustration up in turn.

“Just once more,” I pleaded with her. “Promise. Then, aye, I’ll give it up. Food should be here by then, anyhow.”

“The things I do for love,” Joan quipped, rolling her dark eyes as she shook her head.

“Is that what it is?” I teased right back.

Her cheeks went pink in an instant. “I—I wasn’t—oh, Jesus Christ, it’s just a saying, Lock. I didn’t mean—”

“Yer all right, lass.” This time, when I separated the cards out, I only had to count them. At the eleventh card, I paused. “Queen of Hearts, was it?”

“I—” Joan’s mouth fell open a little. She leaned forward, frowning down at the card I’d just laid out before her. “How—?”

“Well, if it’s no the Queen of Hearts, then I dinnae ken what to tell ye, but—”

I reached to gather the cards back up again, but Joan stopped me by laying her hand on top of mine.

“It *was* the Queen of Hearts, actually,” she said, eyes narrowed with suspicion. “Was that just a lucky guess, or were you playing me the entire time?”

I smirked. “Sure it wasn’t magic? Kinda the point of the whole thing.”

Joan snorted. “No. Not magic, I don’t think. But it *was* a good trick. Now—show me how to do it.”

The waitress brought over our food as I showed Joan the mechanics of the trick.

“All the guessin’ and the bumblin’ is just for show. Misdirection, innit?” I explained as I helped her lay the cards out for herself.

“I was certainly too busy feeling sorry for you to watch what you were doing, at any rate,” she admitted. “It’s an interesting tactic—playing on your opponent’s emotions like that.”

“Nah. Just makin’ myself look like a dumb arsehole tryin’ to impress a pretty girl to sweeten the surprise when I’m right, is all.” I counted the cards out for her on the fourth round, so she could see how it was done. “If ye always put the pile the card’s in between the other two stacks, all ye need is three shuffles. The eleventh card will always be the right one. Clever, eh?”

“Very,” Joan agreed. She reached over to grab a chip off my plate and bit into it. “Let’s see it again.”

By the time we were done eating, I’d shown Joan half a dozen tricks from my repertoire. I taught her how to shuffle the deck, how to count the cards out. Three-card Monte and the Tenkai palm. The Four Burglars. Si Stebbins stack.

She took to it quickly. My bride was a fast learner. She always had been.

But it was her little smiles, her gasps of surprise, her laughter and her warmth that I was really relishing. Card tricks were just that—silly games meant to catch the viewer off guard. The sight of Joan enjoying herself, though—that was real.

It was something I’d been missing for a long time.

“Think any of this will be of use tonight?” she asked after I’d ordered us a plate of shortbread and two coffees for dessert.

“Probably no,” I mused. “But the tactics of it all—the misdirection, playin’ on yer enemy’s emotions, like ye said—that might come in handy.” I winked at her. “If we play our cards right.”

“I’m afraid I might be a little rusty,” she admitted. “Your demon friends are probably going to make me regret showing up to the table at all. I’ll try my best, of course, but—”

“Ach, dinnae fash,” I scoffed. “Tonight, we’re only putting on a show, anyway. I want ye to watch everything with care, though. The way it works down in Avarice, y’see—ye don’t gamble wi’ normal poker chips. Ye gamble wi’...well. I’ll show ye later. Only one thing ye need to keep in mind tonight in that regard, anyway.”

“Which is?”

“If anyone lays white chips down on the table, we fold.” My gaze shifted with seriousness. “If ye want to save a little face, ye can knock my drink over onto me, or pretend to be not feelin’ well. Or...”

“Or suddenly desperate to be taken to bed?” Joan suggested.

I grinned. “Aye, that would do it. Flatterin’ of ye too, at that.”

My cock went stiff just imagining it—Joan in that tight little number we’d picked up for her, tugging on my arm and begging for a bedding.

I gritted my teeth and flexed my thighs until the lust roaring up in my subsided a little.

In fact, I liked that idea just a little too much.

“What’s with the white chips, then? Are they worth more than you’re willing to lose or something?”

“Ye could say that.” I nodded. “The white chips...they’re, ah. They’re tokens of a person’s soul. It’s why Avarice is a dangerous place, ye see. Gamble too hard, for too long—bet too unwisely, lose too many hands—and ye might find yerself tempted to try to win it all back with the only thing ye can’t afford to gamble with at all.”

“I’m glad we’ve agreed to stop before that point, in that case.” Joan shifted closer to me as the coffee and shortbreads arrived. Her knee brushed against my thigh—then, to my satisfaction, stayed pressed there. “But before that...do you think you’ll win?”

“Oh, I’ll likely lose.” I gathered the cards up, shuffled them again, then straightened out the deck once more. “Badly, I imagine. I’m banking on it,

ye could say.”

Joan furrowed her brow as she watched me move the cards between my hands. “Why would you want to lose? Isn’t winning...kind of the point?”

“Ye can learn a lot about a man by how he gambles,” I explained. “Easy losers, no one pays much mind. It’s the winners people watch. Throwin’ the game tonight will cost me a fair price at the tables, but I’m willin’ to pay that for the assurance our fellow gamblers will underestimate me later on. I dinnae want to give anything about myself away.”

Joan cocked her head to the side. She looked impressed. “That’s...very clever of you, Lock.”

I smirked, smug. “I’m aware. But while I’m lettin’ our enemies take me to the cleaners, I’ll need ye to keep an eye on them. Watch how they play. Look for their tells—the little signs that their hand is a fair one, or that they’re bluffin’. That’s information we can use later on.”

“How do you know that they won’t be losing on purpose too?” Joan asked.

I chuckled. “Because creatures of Hell are prideful things, lass. Trust me—if it’s Beelzebub and Mammon we’re up against tonight, they’ll be playin’ to win.”

“Aren’t *you* a creature of Hell, though?” She arched an eyebrow and brushed the backs of her fingers against my chest. “Where’s your pride in all of this?”

“No in poker chips and pocket spades,” I assured her. “I keep it in safer places, I like to think.”

Like the woman sitting there at the table next to me. My Joanie. The ace up my sleeve.

She was my pride. I wouldn’t settle for anything less.

“Do you think tonight has something to do with...” She placed her hand on my knee, leaned in close and lowered her voice. To anyone who might have been observing us nearby, we looked like nothing more than lovers sharing a moment. The King of Hell and his new bride. “With the heist?”

“Reckon it has everything to do with it,” I admitted. “They wouldnae be having us do it otherwise. That’s why I want to know how they play. Might be useful for later, don’t ye think?”

“But poker...that’s not exactly hacking into the mainframe and cracking safes. What kind of heist involves a pointless card game?”

“Everything in Hell is a game of some kind, Joanie,” I warned her. “Gambling most of all.”

She drew back for a moment, frowning. When she leaned back in, she placed her hand on the side of my head and ran her fingers through my hair. Her lips brushed against my ear with the tension of a late November wind, threatening to break fall into winter. “Is this even safe to be fucking with, Lock? Should we even go through with this at all?”

“Course we should.” I turned my head to whisper my words against her mouth. As I spoke, our lips brushed. “And we will. We’ll play the Covenant’s game. Go through all their motions. And aye—we’ll steal whatever it is they’re after. Just as they want.”

Her dark lashes veiled her eyes. She was staring at my mouth, I realized. Close like this, I could hardly blame her.

I liked watching her lips, too.

“But if the Covenant is evil...” she murmured. “Giving them what they want...that will only hurt humanity in the long run, won’t it?”

“Oh, I’m sure whatever it is they’ve set their hearts on is well worth having.” I smirked, then stole a quick peck of a kiss. “I’m just no plannin’ on handing it over to them when we’re done.”

“That’s...downright dastardly of you, Lock.” A slow, wicked smile spread across Joan’s lips as she leaned back. “Evil, some might say.”

“Aye. Well. What can I say?” I rolled my tongue across my lips, trying to find any lingering taste of her there. “I’m an evil man.”

For a moment, smiling at Joan like that—seeing her grin reflected back at me—I felt like my old self again.

The man she wanted. The man she needed.

The man I could still be for her, maybe—as long as I could keep her by my side.

JOAN

My body flushed with heat as Lock zipped up my dress later that night. The dress was still revealing. It was still sinfully tight. But it gave Lock a good reason to touch me.

For the pleasure of having his hands on my body, I was coming to relish any excuse we could make.

We'd spent the day going over common poker tells. Independently, any little action could mean anything. But after a few rounds of the game, if you tied those actions to how the player placed their bets and the ultimate results of each hand, a tug of the collar or a glance to the left could easily give it all away.

"What are those scars from?" I asked as I sat on the bed and watched him get dressed.

He had his tuxedo pants and shiny black shoes on already. But his belt was undone still, and he hadn't gotten around to shrugging on his shirt quite yet.

"These?" Lock reached behind him and craned his neck to look over his shoulder. Between his muscular shoulder blades, on either side of his spine, there were two twisted, pale marks that marred his skin. They were far from Lock's only scars, of course—he *was* a demon warrior, after all—but those ones were big enough, they really stood out.

"They look like they hurt." I rose from the bed and went over to him, running my fingertips down their lengths. "When you got them, at least."

“Oh, they hurt all right. Somethin’ fierce, truth be told.” Lock held himself tense at my touch at first. But after a moment, his muscles started to ease back into a more relaxed state. “From when my wings were torn off, just before the Fall. First pain I ever truly felt.”

“You still have wings, though,” I pointed out. “That night—” *The night I married you*, I stopped myself from saying. “You flew me back here on them. The black ones.”

“Demon’s wings,” Lock explained. He turned, took the fingers that had been stroking him into his massive hand, and brought my knuckles up to his lips for a kiss. “Before that, though—they were as white as the ones of those angels whose arses we kicked.” He winked. “Bigger, too.”

I glanced down at the lap of his slacks and nodded. “I can imagine.”

“Good.” Lock’s lips spread into an easy grin. For a fallen angel, he had the most likable smile I’d ever laid eyes on. It rarely failed to meet the greens of his eyes. “Keep imaginin’. Ye ken what they say about angels with big wings, after all...”

I watched him put on his shirt, then his jacket. What exactly they said about angels with big wings, I could easily guess.

I’d felt his cock against me that night when he’d saved my life. Long and thick and impossibly hard. I’d been so certain that he was going to fuck me then and there. I’d wanted him to, even.

It would have done more than just save my life. It would have sealed the deal on our marriage as well.

As soon as we fucked, we really would be husband and wife.

Even if it was fake. Just part of a con.

Some covenants were more honest than others, even when they were trying not to be. The Covenant that controlled this mission might have been built on lies, but I’d seen the look on Lock’s face when he’d said our vows.

He’d meant every word.

“It’s hard to imagine you as an angel at all, you know,” I admitted.

Lock looped his bow tie around his shoulders and settled it beneath his collar as he looked in the mirror. “Is it?” He laughed. “Cannae imagine why.”

“I’ve seen you in battle, Lock. If I didn’t know better, I’d say you fought like a real demon,” I joked. I watched him struggle with the tie for

a moment, then put a hand on his shoulder and turned him to face me. “Let me help you with that.”

He smiled down at me. “Thank ye, lass. Never been much opposed to tyin’ knots, mind, but this one...it’s always eluded me a bit.”

“It just takes a little practice, is all.” I turned his collar up to give myself some room to work with. “Did you always know you were going to fall from grace?”

“Up in Heaven, even before the rebellion and the fall, I don’t reckon I was ever cut out to be an angel,” he admitted as I straightened out the lengths of black silk. I needed the side on my left to be about two inches longer than the side on my right. “When the Almighty created me, he made me into one stubborn bastard. No so good at seein’ things in black and white like, say, Michael and Gabriel are.”

“Maybe that’s a good thing.” I crossed the left part of the tie over the right, then tucked it under and pulled it up. “The world’s full of colors, and there are always shades of gray in between.”

“Exactly,” he agreed. “Used to make me angry. Ended up pickin’ a lot of fights—even before Lucifer took a fancy to the humans and asked me to join him in taking a stand about givin’ them free will. Angels deal in order, y’see—but there’s nothin’ wrong with chaos, the way I see it. Natural state of things, when ye think about it.”

“It is.” I believed that, too. I laid one side of the tie over Lock’s shoulder and folded the other side inward, so it made the shape of the bow it would soon become. “My whole life’s been chaos. My parents died when I was just a toddler. I spent my childhood being shuffled around from foster home to foster home. CPS puts people through a lot of paperwork to keep it orderly, but there’s not a lot that’s more chaotic for a kid than being shuffled around by bureaucracy like that.”

I didn’t know why I was telling Lock this. To illustrate that I understood what he was saying, maybe.

Maybe, I was just starting to open up to him. Starting to trust.

“Were ye unhappy as a bairn, lass?” He asked the question like he already knew the answer.

I guessed even demons knew how hellish growing up in the foster care system was.

“I was a terror,” I said with a small laugh. I took the other end of the tie off of Lock’s shoulder and settled it down the center of the bow I was

forming. I barely had to think about it. Muscle memory. It made the tie look like a black elephant with a lumpy trunk. “Lots of different families tried to adopt me at first—I was young enough that people were willing to give me a shot—but I guess the Almighty made me pretty stubborn, too.”

“A woman after my own heart,” Lock said fondly. “Yer a fighter, too.”

“More of a brat, really. I threw a lot of tantrums, apparently. Made things difficult for myself.” I fidgeted with the tie, making sure it was just tight enough to stay in place before I finished it off. “When I was about nine or so, I was placed with an elderly couple. They sort of...got me, I guess. Understood. Knew how to deal with all of my anger and angst. It was good. For a little while.”

“What happened?” Of course, anyone could have guessed that something must have gone wrong.

In stories like mine, something always did.

“The wife died. Cancer. And the husband...he didn’t take it well. Probably depression, I guess. I didn’t blame him. He’d lost the love of his life. Who can be expected to keep themselves together after that?”

Beneath the knot of the tie, Lock’s Adam’s apple bobbed.

“S’pose yer right,” he said, sounding a little hoarse. “It’s a hard thing, to lose the one ye love the most.”

“Exactly. But he was struggling with...you know. Basic things. Showering. Getting himself to work on time. I tried to make up for it as best I could, but CPS ultimately determined that it wasn’t the right environment for a child.” I focused my eyes on the bow tie. I’d loved Rosa and Henry. They’d been kind to me. Put up with a lot of my childhood angst. Given me a safe, happy home to live in for as long as they could. I knew, bringing all those emotions back up again like this...if I met Lock’s eyes in that moment, I’d probably cry. Not exactly my favorite pastime. “They were probably right, but...it sucked anyway. Like you said. The world isn’t black and white.”

“I’m sorry, lass.” Lock raised a hand to my cheek and brushed his fingers across it gently. “Truly. Ye didn’t deserve to suffer like that.”

“No one ever does.” I set my jaw and finished making the bow. Tugged on either end of it so it would stay in place. “But for a while, when it was just Henry—the husband—and me, I’d do his bow tie for him like this. It was...nice. Something helpful I could do.” I took a step back and kept my gaze low. “Not that it mattered in the end.”

“Ach, lass...dinnae be stupid. C’mere.” Lock took a step forward and wrapped me up in his arms. His voice rumbled through his chest as he held me against it. “Ye were only a girl, and ye did yer best for the person ye loved. That mattered. More than ye’ll ever understand, I bet.”

“He was doing his best too,” I murmured. *Don’t cry*, I told myself. In the safety of Lock’s arms, it was far too tempting to let the waterworks go, but I’d already cried in front of Lock once in the short time we’d known each other. Didn’t want to start again.

“I’m sure he was.” Lock smoothed a hand down the back of my head, stroking me soothingly. “The world can be an unkind place, aye. But doin’ things for love—even when other people dinnae agree or understand—that always matters. Reckon he’d be proud of the women ye’ve become. They both would. Yer parents, too.”

I let out a breath. Allowed myself to exist the moment for just a little longer. Lock’s body was warm and big and safe. His words, kind.

Then, I stiffened in Lock’s arms and gently pushed him away.

“We should finish getting ready,” I told him, shoving the rest of my feelings on this matter down as far as they would go. “We’ve got a job to do. No point in wallowing in the past, right?”

“Aye,” Lock agreed. “As ye say.”

I went into the bathroom and put my makeup on. Thankfully, the urge to blubber and sob had left me. For now, at least.

I believed what I’d told Lock. The past was gone. It shaped us and made us who we were, yes, but it was the future that really mattered.

Tonight was the real beginning of our mission. If we carried it out properly and avoided playing into the hands of the Covenant while we did so, we’d be one step closer to the thing that was most important to me now:

Saving Bea, and Abbie, and Ava. Saving Ava’s mother, if Lock was able to.

When the apocalypse finally kicked off and Heaven began to do battle with Hell on Earth, whatever the Covenant thought we were stealing for them might even help us save the entire human race.

If anything mattered, that did.

As I stepped back out into the room with red lipstick on and smoky eyes, I only looked forward.

There was nothing to be gained from looking back.

“Hell’s bells, Joanie.” Lock turned his head to look at me and didn’t bother to hide his stare. It traveled up my body, then back down it, then all the way back up again. It sent a fluttering through my stomach, being looked at like that.

“Distracting enough for you?” I asked, forcing a smile onto my lips.

“Aye,” Loch said through awe-filled laugh. “I reckon so. C’mere for a mo’, will ye? I’ve got just the thing to finish yer look.”

“I don’t know that I’ve got the gravitas to pull off much more than what I’m already wearing, Lock.” I gestured to the dress. Between the way it made accessories of my tits, hips and ass, it was already kind of a lot. Adding anything else to the ensemble would be pushing it.

“Dinnae worry about pulling it off. I’ll do that for ye later, if ye like.” Lock carried a small box over to the bed, sat down and patted the mattress next to him. “Pop yer wee foot up here for me, will ye?”

“I’ll...try.” The dress wasn’t exactly designed to maximize my range of motion, and the heels I had on were pretty high. In the end, I had to hold onto Lock’s shoulder to keep my balance. “There. Now...mind telling me what this is about?”

“Gotta hike the dress a bit higher first.” Lock made no apology as he placed a hand on my upper thigh and edged the hem of the dress all the way up to my hip. Only then, when my leg was completely bare to him, did he open the box.

“Is that...a holster?” I gave the black straps that Lock pulled from the box a dubious stare. “Lock, is that a *knife*?”

“It is, aye. Figured since we havenae exactly gotten around to consummating our union yet—and given yer fondness for that letter opener ye found—ye might fancy having a proper weapon to protect yourself wi’.”

He unfurled the straps, laid them over my upper thigh, and set them straight.

“Where did you even *get* that?” Not from Indulgence, I suspected—unless they had a secret backroom boutique filled with flamethrowers and grenades that I’d been too busy picking out lipsticks and purses to notice?

Surely not.

“Nipped down to Might—that’s on the seventh floor—while ye were in the shower earlier,” Lock revealed. “Ye were always—ah. I mean. It seemed like it suited ye. That’s all.”

Lock might have been right about that. I liked having a weapon on hand when my situation allowed for it.

But what really suited me in that moment was Lock's fingers brushing against my inner thigh as he did up the straps.

He placed a hand on my hip to help me keep my balance, then pulled my leg closer to him, until my foot was nestled between his thighs. Lock's fingers moved with a practiced kind of precision, but they moved slow, too. Dangerously slow.

The skin of my inner thighs was delicate. Sensitive. Thin. Just feeling his presence so close to my cunt was enough to make me throb for him as fantasy flooded my mind.

So easily, he could have kept moving his hand upward. Cupped my pussy over the black thong I wore. Took my sex into his big, rough hand—squeezed—slipped his fingers beneath the lace, pushed them into my folds... Made me moan for him. Made me shake.

Watched my eyes roll back as he took me with his fingers and made me come against his palm.

Fuck. I was wet. I could smell it. And if I could smell my own want...

I knew Lock could as well.

My fingers tightened around his shoulder. I needed something to hold onto. Something to ground myself with before all these imaginings of mine left me floating away on a cloud of desire.

But holding onto Lock presented other problems.

He was the thing I desired.

Fuck the Covenant. Fuck whatever machinations they might have in store for us.

I wanted him. Needed him. Our conversation earlier had left me raw. After pushing down all my feelings, I felt empty.

Lock was warm and alive and said all the right things at all the right times. He filled the dark void inside my chest with something new and bright.

"Lock," I breathed, closing my eyes as I tried my damndest to hold myself together.

"Joan?" When I opened my eyes again, he was staring up at me, almost pleading. *Tell me*, those greens of his said. *Ask me for what you want, and it's yours.*

As if he thought I needed the extra urging, he curled his fingers around my inner thigh and started moving it upward. Slow, but steady. Giving me plenty of time to stop him—but making it incredibly clear what his intended destination was.

Fuck. Fuck! Fuck my entire life.

“If you keep touching me like that...” I rasped, fighting back a shudder. We had other plans for this evening. Responsibilities to people beyond ourselves. “We’re going to be incredibly late for our meeting tonight.”

“Ah...right.” Lock clenched his jaw and shook his head like he was trying to knock something inside his skull loose. “Are ye ready to go, then?”

Lock helped me down, rose to his feet and offered me his arm. It took me a second to compose myself, though.

I didn’t want to go to Avarice to gamble with devils. I wanted to stay here with him. Keep laughing and joking and talking about our hurts. Learning each other, knowing each other, finding silly reasons to touch each other until finally, something broke and we didn’t need excuses at all anymore.

Maybe there was something inside me that needed to be knocked loose, too.

Maybe, it was inside my heart.

“Of course,” I said, swallowing hard. I straightened out my skirt and grabbed my purse. “Thank you. For the knife.”

“Think nothing of it. As I said, it suits ye.”

“Is it going to matter that I’m obviously armed?” I ran my fingers over the sheath, relishing the way that it looked strapped around my thigh. He was right. It *did* suit me. But I wasn’t exactly concealing anything from anyone. My dress was far too short and tight for that. “It’s not exactly hard to miss.”

“Joanie, lookin’ like ye do tonight...” Lock gave me a long, lingering look up and down, clenched his jaw, then tore his gaze away. “Frankly, I dinnae think they’ll so much as notice the knife.”

There was a tinge of regret in his voice. I understood it. I felt the same thing in my chest.

What we were doing here was important. Carrying out our mission so we could double-cross the people who had tasked us with it. Finding a way

to steal something important from Hell—something that a man who made angels tremble wanted.

We'd claim it for humanity.

We'd use it to save the world.

As I curled my fingers around the crook of Lock's arm, I couldn't help but cast a glance back at the bed we shared.

There was no denying it: no matter what our responsibilities were or what we faced tonight, I knew I would've had much more fun rolling around with him between the sheets instead.

JOAN

I had to admit, when the Covenant offered me this mission, this was pretty much the last place I'd thought I would end up.

Practically vibrating with horniness in the tightest, most revealing dress I'd ever worn in a demonic casino with a knife strapped to my hip.

Not that I was complaining, exactly. I liked a little color in my jobs. It was part of why I'd accepted this gig in the first place.

Plus, if I hadn't taken the mission, I never would have ended up married to Lock.

I'd seen a lot of the world since I'd started working for the Covenant. I knew, compared to standing there with Lock's hand on my lower back while a machine clinked poker chips into a little golden pail for me...

There were certainly worse places to be.

"I can't believe Hell runs its casinos based on credit," I joked as the machine filled my bucket up to the brim. "This is a lot of chips to give someone for just pulling a lever."

"Oh, that's no credit," Lock assured me. "Have a closer look at one. Every chip in that bucket is one ye've verrae much earned."

I picked up a chip and studied it. Written across its face in gold lettering was a single phrase: *Held Evie's hair while she puked in the Alpha Omega Mu bathroom.*

I frowned down at it. Holding the hair of drunk girls at frat houses seemed like something I would do...but I didn't recall an Evie. Must've

been some random from my undergrad, I guessed.

I traded it for another one, then another.

Told Bea about the spinach between her teeth before her graduation speech.

Threatened to force-feed Ava's professor his own dissertation until he stopped hitting on her.

I laughed. *Those* ones I recalled. Bea's speech had been incredible, and Creepy Randall, Ava's biology professor, had been—well. A creep. If I closed my eyes, I could still see the look of terror on his face when I'd confronted him about his fuckboy behavior.

"What are these?" I asked Lock.

"Your good deeds, 'course. Every time ye do somethin' kind, be it for a friend, a stranger, or a foe, ye get a chip. Easy as that."

"Huh." It seemed like kind of a rigged system—once you knew about it, it would be all too easy to start doing kindnesses just to build up karma—but I hadn't even thought about any of my so-called good deeds in the moment. I'd just done them.

Maybe Hell accounted for nefarious intent?

If it didn't, it was entirely possible that our opponents at the poker table tonight had racked up plenty of chips themselves.

I looked into Lock's bucket. It was about a quarter of the way full, which seemed...strange.

If I could earn poker chips for telling Bea she had spinach in her teeth, there was no reason that someone as generous as Lock should have so few.

"What happened here?" I asked, reaching in and running my fingers through Lock's chips. "You don't have a gambling addiction, do you?"

"Nah. What is it that yer Kenny Rogers said? Something about knowing when to hold 'em and knowing when to fold 'em." Gently, Lock laughed and drew his bucket away from me. "But fer particularly bad deeds, ye can lose chips. Reckon I've earned a fair few strikes against my ledger in my time."

"From doing what?" I picked up one of Lock's chips and read the inscription. "*Wrote a love letter to—*"

"Give that back, lass." Lock snatched the chip from my fingers before I could make out the name.

"Goodness, Lock. Who were you writing love letters to?" I teased. But even as I said the words, I felt a twinge of something sharp in my gut.

Who *had* he been writing to? One of his other warrior women, maybe?

“A dead woman now.” Lock scowled, shook his head, and dropped the chip back into the bucket with the rest. “As fer how I’ve lost my chips—avenging dead women, if ye must know.”

“Avenging women you’ve loved doesn’t sound like a bad deed,” I said slowly. “How can it be? It’s normal, isn’t it, to want to make things right when someone you care about is taken from you?”

“Normal, maybe, aye. But revenge isnae necessarily a good thing—and in the past, I had, ah, a penchant for being incredibly thorough.” Lock cleared his throat and scanned the crowd. His eyes landed on a cocktail waitress bearing a golden tray laden with glasses of champagne. “Stay here, will ye? I’m goin’ to go sort out drinks for tonight. Need to convince someone to make sure we’re only gettin’ soda water or coke.”

“We’re not drinking tonight?”

“Nah. Want to keep our wits about us.” Lock gave me a wink. “But if I’m clever, I might be able to make sure everyone else at our table is gettin’ doubles as well.”

My mind was working overtime trying to imagine the kind of women Lock must have loved in the past as I watched him go. What about them had stirred his heart? Had he loved them enough that avenging their deaths had been worth losing so many chips?

It shouldn’t have mattered. It wasn’t like I hadn’t had partners before I met Lock—though, notably, none that I’d been in love with.

It wasn’t even like our marriage was supposed to be real.

So why did I even care?

I tracked his tall, broad frame to where he was conversing with the cocktail waitress a few feet away. She was a beautiful redhead dressed like a showgirl, complete with revealing silver bikini and red-feathered headdress. From her body language, I could tell that she found Lock attractive. She smiled a little too brightly as he spoke, laughed at his every word—could what he was saying really be that funny?—and when he was done speaking, she laid her hand on his elbow, giving his arm a too-friendly squeeze.

Did *that* make me jealous now, too?

Lock regarded her touch with a confused furrow of his brow, but otherwise didn’t react. It was enough, though. She seemed to pick up on some unspoken message he was broadcasting. Her cheeks flushed pink for

a moment, then she nodded and took a step back. Her bustle swished as she hurried away.

No, then. Apparently not.

My envy was solely focused on the women who'd fought at Lock's side in the past.

Maybe because I wanted what they had, I guessed. Fighting alongside Lock had been a thrill. The way our bodies had moved together was the product of a rare symmetry. I'd never felt like that around anyone else.

That went double for the way he made my pussy throb and my body shiver when the battle was done, as well.

Or maybe...

I sighed as I watched Lock return to me, a grin on his face and a twinkle in his eyes. He gave me a thumb up—he'd negotiated the alcohol successfully, it seemed.

He was tall and handsome and charming. Didn't fall prey to silly flirtations from random women. Made me laugh. Held me when I cried and, when it came to addressing the subject of whoever had put me in tears, he made some of the most exceptional threats I'd ever heard.

He was good. He was kind. And he was, unbelievably, my husband.

Maybe, I just wanted his affections all to myself.

"JOANIE, THIS IS MAMMON." At our poker table with our non-alcoholic drinks in hand, Lock introduced me to a grinning little old man with oily, dark hair. In the stilettos I was wearing this evening, I was a good six inches taller than normal, but Mammon's back was so badly hunched that I was pretty sure I would have been taller than him barefoot.

Mammon was using his current vantage point to stare directly at my breasts.

I supposed Lock's idea of a distraction of an outfit was already working out better than expected. Or...maybe worse.

"Bella! Bellissima! Ciao, tesoro mio, ciao!" Mammon snatched my hand and yanked it toward his lips, then promptly began layering on a legion of kisses up my arm with *far* too much tongue. "A pleasure! A treat! How lovely to—"

"That's enough, ye horny bastard." Lock grabbed Mammon by the collar of his tux and hauled him away from me. "Ye dinnae need to be *lickin'* her, she's my wife, for fuck's sake—"

“And I’m Beelzebub.” The words came with a faint, throaty buzzing as a tall, dark-haired man stepped forward. He was handsome in the way a night-shift mortician might have been: pale and striking, but carrying with him a general vibe of impending doom. When he took my hand, he kissed it as well—just once. His lips were cold and dry. When they touched my skin, even though he wasn’t speaking anymore, the same buzzing in his voice filled my ears instead. “How lovely you look, Joan.”

“Thank you,” I said politely, withdrawing my hand as quickly as I could get away with. “That’s so kind of you to say.”

I retreated back to Lock’s side as Mammon and Beelzebub sat down at the poker table. A man with wavy, shoulder-length black hair and red eyes was playing dealer. When those red eyes focused onto me, questioning—would he be dealing me in as well?—Lock sat down and pulled me onto his lap.

“Just the three of us tonight, Asmodeus.” Lock placed a whiskery kiss on my cheek. “Joanie here is just my good luck charm.”

The dealer—Asmodeus—nodded. “As you wish, my liege.”

Then, he began dealing out the cards.

The game, it appeared, was blackjack. I knew how it worked—each of the players at the table was going up against the dealer, rather than each other. As long as their hands added up closer to twenty-one than Asmodeus’ cards did, they’d win.

The biggest difference between this game and any other I’d ever seen, of course, was that everyone at the table was a fallen angel or a demon.

No one gambled quite in the same way as creatures of Hell.

The game moved fast—faster than I could even track at times. Hands were dealt, hits were taken and bets were called in such rapid succession, I didn’t know how any of them were managing to keep it up.

If this had been any other casino, Asmodeus would have adhered to a set of strict rules about how he played to give the house the best advantage. But as I watched the cards move and the chips shift back and forth, I quickly realized that this wasn’t true here. His red eyes were watching Lock, Mammon and Beelzebub as intently as I was.

He was trying to read their tells as well so he could play his own hands in kind.

By the time they were done, my ass had started to ache from perching on Lock’s thigh for so long. Hours must have passed since we sat down,

but the speed of the game made it feel like it everything was happening in mere minutes and in days all at once.

By the end of it, Lock had fewer chips to his name than ever. He'd lost gloriously, just as he'd intended to. Zeb and Mammon hadn't made out much better, I noticed. They were both bristling with annoyance as they gathered up the few remaining chips they were left with by the time Asmodeus packed up the cards, bowed and backed away.

Lock, on the other hand, looked to be in good spirits.

"Well, lady luck may no have been on our side tonight, mo leannan." He laid a smart little smack on the side of my ass. "But it's been nice havin' ye here on my lap anyway."

"Maybe you'll get luckier when we get back to the room," I purred back at him, playing my part. Honestly, I was more than ready to leave—both so I could unpack what I'd gleaned from Zeb's and Mammon's playing styles, and because just watching the game had been kind of exhausting. My eyes were sore from darting around the table all night. Not that I was about to let it show. I dipped my lips to the curve of his ear and gently bit it. "In fact...I can almost guarantee you will."

"Can ye now?" Lock hummed with pleasure, closed his eyes and tilted his head back like he was relishing this moment.

The growing firmness of his cock beneath my ass told me that it was probably more than just an act, too.

"You two seem to be getting along well," Zeb commented. He rose from the table with a dark look in his eyes and turned to loom over us. "Such a shame."

"I dinnae ken about shame, lad," Lock said with a chuckle as he helped me up off his lap. When he rose to his full height behind me, I was happy to note that he was several inches taller than Zeb. Broader and more muscular, too. "Though, ask me about that in the morn and my answer may have changed." Lock's eyes were wicked as he brought his grabbed my ass possessively. "Who knows what kinda depravity the two of us will get up to tonight?"

"Maybe if you'd been willing to place your little pet human up for a bet tonight, you wouldn't be down so many chips." Zeb reached out and grabbed my wrist, tugging to me to him. He was stronger than he looked. His grip left me tumbling forward on my heels straight into his chest. "But

the night's still young. What do you say, Joan? One more round?" Zeb smiled an awful smile. "We could play for keeps."

Annoyance simmered through me as I stared up into Zeb's black eyes. The buzzing was in my head again—like a deafening swarm of ugly flies crawling over something dead.

"She's no pet," Lock said with a threatening casualness from behind me. I heard his knuckles crack. "Reckon ye've got about...ah, let's say two seconds to unhand my wife. Or else."

"Or else what?" Zeb sneered, obviously not moved by Lock's words. If anything, he only tightened his grip on my wrist.

"Or else..." With my free hand, I swiped my knife from my thigh and pressed it against the lap of Zeb's slacks nice and firm. I kept a smile on my lips as I did it, even as I felt Zeb tense in response. "You might find yourself losing more than just a hand or two."

Zeb's eyes went cold in an instant. He stared down at me with a look of pure hate.

"Is that dagger made of blessed iron, Joan?" he asked. "If you intend to actually do anything with it, you'd best hope it is."

I jabbed the knife a little firmer into his lap. "Fuck around and find out."

It was a bluff—I had no idea what the dagger was made of. But as Zeb released my wrist and backed away, I was happy to learn it wasn't a bluff he wanted to call.

"She's well suited for you, Moloch." Zeb held up his hands in surrender as he continued to walk backwards out of the scene. "Just as violent as you are, isn't she?"

"Aye," Lock agreed. "That she is. Remember it for the next time ye forget yerself. Next time, she might no be so kind as to give ye the chance to yield first."

Lock moved to me as soon as Zeb turned to disappear into the crowd.

"Are ye all right, lass?" he dipped down to purr in my ear. His arms wound around me, holding me close from behind.

"Of course I am. He's not the first man to try something like that on me. Probably won't be the last, either." I thought about sheathing my knife—but then I glanced over and noticed the way Mammon was still standing there, staring at me. I turned the point of the blade in his direction instead. "Do you have something to add, Mammon?"

Mammon blinked, then chuckled as a grin found his lips. “Not in the least, bella. We’ve all lost enough tonight. I may be a greedy man, but I am not, I think, such a stupid one.”

He winked at me, then followed Zeb’s path into the crowd.

“Fuck’s sake,” Lock breathed once they were both gone. “I’m sorry, lass. Ye shouldnae have had to deal with that.”

“I didn’t mind,” I told him honestly. I turned in his arms so I could face him. The smile on my lips was still bright. “It was nice, even, having a chance to pull a knife on that fucker.”

“And ye did so beautifully,” Lock said approvingly. The furrow in his brow eased out as his lips spread into a smile of their own. “Zeb was right on one count—ye make a verrae good match for me, Joanie.” He moved his hand to my cheek, stroking all the way up to my temple and raking his fingers through my hair. “The best.”

I closed my eyes and leaned into his touch. Adrenaline was still shifting through me. Beneath that was the gentle ache of exhaustion.

But beneath that still was something warm and comfortable. With Lock’s hands on me like this and his body so close to mine, I felt that comfort echo between us. Like a note played on a piano that called vibrations into the string of a guitar on the other side of the room.

Maybe we were just two of a kind.

JOAN

“Here,” Lock said as he saw me perched on the bed, struggling with the ankle straps of my stilettos. He dropped to one knee in front of me, then pulled my foot up onto his thigh. “Let me.”

Lock’s fingers brushed across my ankle, then eased the strap out of its buckle. He made it look simple. Probably, it was.

But now that we were out of Avarice and back up in the room, the exhaustion in my body had multiplied straight into infinity. My brain was still firing at a mile a minute, but my body felt sluggish and slow.

I was physically tired and mentally wired. A dangerous combination.

“Thank you,” I mumbled down to him as he slipped my foot out of the heel. He pressed his thumb into my arch, massaging a tension I’d been too wiped to even realize I had. “That...oh.” I closed my heavy eyelids and nodded. “That feels really...really nice.”

“Ye deserve a bit of nice, I reckon.” He gave my right foot a final squeeze, then moved to the left to give it the same treatment. “Ye did well tonight, Joanie. But if yer feelin’ tired—”

“Like an old, worn-out knock-knock joke,” I confirmed. “I wish I could sleep, but I don’t think my brain’s ready to settle down yet.”

“Aye, Avarice will do that to ye.” He pulled my foot up to his lips and placed a firm kiss to my inner ankle. “It’s meant to drain ye, really. Playin’ the slots is all right as long as yer not too keen on winnin’, but the tables—

where the real gambling happens—those will suck ye in easy if ye let them. Drain ye dry, too.”

“And I wasn’t even gambling.” I sighed as he lowered my foot to the floor and rose once more. “You must feel even more spent than I do.”

“Ach, I’m all right.” He turned to give me a wink, then moved to the phone on the nightstand next to the bed. “I’ve got the stamina of a fallen angel and the stubbornness of a demon. Makes it easier to manage. But *you*—” He sat down on the bed and picked up the phone. “—are gloriously, brilliantly human. And ye haven’t eaten dinner yet, either. Gonna order somethin’ up from Indulgence. Fancy a bite?”

My eyes wandered to his lips as he spoke.

A bite sounded nice right now—though, a slightly different kind than what he was offering.

“I’d love a bite,” I admitted. Maybe getting some food in me would help wind my brain down. “Do they do cheeseburgers?”

Lock laughed. “They’re a Michelin-star restaurant in Hell, Joanie. They do everything.”

I went to the bathroom to remove my makeup while Lock ordered us a late dinner. It was strange, having so much makeup on. Tonight I’d worn my lipstick and eyeliner like war paint. I’d needed it, too.

But I felt most like myself when my face was bare. I probably looked prettier beneath the magic of foundation and mascara. That wasn’t really me, though.

It was one of the many nice things about Lock. He didn’t make me feel like I had to be pretty.

In fact, he seemed to like me best when I was kicking ass at his side and threatening fallen angels with my knife.

As I wiped my lipstick away with a cotton pad, I thought again about all those other women he’d battled alongside in the past. The one I’d seen—been?—in that vision I’d had...

She’d been covered in ash and mud and carnage. Who even knew what else? Her hair had been a mess. Blood had dripped from her sword, slick and fresh. I doubted she’d ever seen the inside of a spa, let alone one as swanky as Vexations had been...

But he’d looked at her with such awe anyway. Like he’d never seen a more beautiful person in his entire existence.

It was the exact same way that, as I stepped back out into the room without a lick of makeup on, I caught him looking at me.

“You’re staring, Lock,” I pointed out, pausing just beyond the bathroom’s doorway. He’d stripped out of his tuxedo jacket and unbuttoned his dress shirt while I’d been in the bathroom. His bow tie hung around his neck, undone.

“Aye,” Lock rasped, mouth slightly agape. “I am.”

I took a step closer, tentative. His chest was visible through the opening in his button-down. Broad and firm. Hairy. Rugged.

A warrior’s chest.

Beneath it, I knew, a warrior’s heart beat as well.

“See something you like?” I teased. My voice sounded more shy than I’d expected, though. Almost...innocent? Uncertain?

“Aye,” Lock said again. “I do.”

A gentle blush rose to my cheeks.

I was certain about a few things now, at least.

I liked the way Lock was looking at me.

I liked the look of Lock, too.

We stood there for a few long seconds, just...looking at each other. Every other beat of my heart produced a small pang that resounded through me. It vibrated in my bones like a church bell being rung at close range.

My pulse was quickening. Heat was stirring in my stomach, being fluttered around by the wings of invisible butterflies.

The silence between us as we looked each other over was thrilling. Deafening, too.

I licked my lips and took another step forward.

“Could you help me out of my dress?” I asked.

Lock raised his eyebrows, blinked twice, then set his jaw and nodded.

“Course.” He took a step closer to me as well. “Ye must be achin’ to get out of it. And ye can hardly undo the zipper yerself.”

“No,” I agreed, turning around like he’d told me to. “That’s true. I can’t.”

What a strange blessing this stupid dress had turned out to be. It was an excuse to feel his hands on my body again. After the night we’d had, I wanted more from Lock than just a look.

I felt him approach me from behind. Lock moved slowly and quietly, but as he neared, it was in the air. The scent of his cologne, earthy and rich. The warmth that radiated off his skin.

I sighed as his hand found my hip.

Hot as Hell.

“Careful, Joanie.” Lock’s voice was a low rumble over my ear as he slid my zipper down. “Makin’ noises like that...ye’ll bring out the bad in me, if ye keep that up.”

“Are you really as bad of a man as you claim?” I asked, glancing over my shoulder at him.

Yes, I wanted him to say. *Wicked. Evil. Full of filthy thoughts and an appetite for sin.*

“Sometimes,” Lock said instead. He lowered his lips to my neck and let his breath, warm and humid, wash over my skin. My body went stiff with anticipation as his teeth grazed against my flesh. The ghost of a bite. “But I’m a lucky man, too. Ye keep me good.”

His teeth left me as he finished unzipping me. My dress fell to the floor, leaving me standing there in only my thong.

I placed an arm across my tits and slowly, turned to face him. His eyes wandered to my chest immediately.

I didn’t mind.

My eyes were wandering to his, too.

Thick muscles. Soft chest hair. The faint smattering of old, pale battle scars etched into his skin. He had an awfully dangerous physique for a good man.

An even more dangerous body for a bad one.

“Maybe I don’t want you to be good anymore.” Slowly, I took a step forward and moved my arm away from my breasts. My knees were trembling, but I willed them to keep me upright for just a few minutes more.

If this was going where I thought it was—where I hoped—I wouldn’t be vertical for much longer now.

Neither of us would be.

“No?” Lock’s jawline twitched. I saw his breath catch in his throat as his gaze trailed down from my nipples to my hips. “What would ye prefer instead?”

“Maybe...maybe I’m ready for you. For all of you.” There was no maybe about it. Not anymore. A flush of heat was blooming inside me like a flower unfurling its petals in the darkness of my core. I raised my hand to the red-gold curls that covered his chest and pressed my palm firmly against the swell of his pec. “Maybe I want you bad.”

“Do ye now?” His chest rose against my touch in a long, aching breath. “So ye can gain my powers? Protect yourself after? Or...somethin’ else?”

“So I can protect myself, yes.” I trailed my thumb to the valley between his pectorals and slid it down his torso, following the paths his muscles made beneath his skin. “And...yes. Something else, too.”

He released his breath with a shudder and gripped my shoulders. The tension in his body was palpable. Like pressing my hand against a set of flood gates that were straining to hold a tidal wave behind them.

“And yer sure about this, mo leannan?” Lock slid his big, rough hands down my arms. There was a forcefulness simmering behind the gentleness of his touch.

It was a visceral thing: I could literally feel him holding himself back.

“Of course I’m sure,” I whispered, staring up at him. “Why else would I have asked?”

“Aye. But, it’s only...” He opened his eyes. His gaze locked on mine. There was fire burning dark in the greens of his irises. Within that fire, I saw a beast dangerously close to thrashing its way out of its cage. “I want ye, Joanie. My body’s starvin’ for ye. Has been since...” He shook his head. “A verrae long while.”

“Good.” I raised my hands to his cheeks and raked my fingers through the thickness of his beard. “I’m ready. I want you, too.”

He drew a sharp breath. “Joan...”

“Lock?”

He captured my wrists in his hands in an instant. Tugged me toward him and dipped his head down until his lips were brushing against mine.

“If I take ye,” he growled in warning. “Once I start, I dinnae ken that I’ll be able to stop.”

A shiver rippled down my spine. My body was tired still, but Lock’s words stirred something within me. Something just as dark and just as hungry as the sound of his voice.

“I don’t want you to,” I admitted breathlessly. “I don’t want you to stop.”

Lock's lips curled into a wicked smile against mine.

"Ah," he purred, taking my breast in his hand. He ran his thumb across the stiff peak of my nipple, then squeezed—hard and tight. "I was hopin' ye might say that."

JOAN

The mattress bounced beneath me as Lock tossed me onto the bed. He was strong, big and broad and muscular, and my body was small, almost delicate by comparison.

Still, it never failed to surprise me how easily he could throw me around.

“Spread yer legs.” Lock took his belt buckle in his hands and began to undo it in sharp, measured motions. “Before I spread them for ye.”

I squeezed my knees together as my pussy spasmed, clenching around nothing. There was no smile on Lock’s handsome lips anymore. No hint of his usual teasing or mirth. His brow and jaw were both set with seriousness. The only glimmer in his green eyes was a dark, wicked one.

He looked dangerous, and my body liked that. *I* liked that.

The time I took to respond to Lock was obviously just a little too long for his liking, though. His belt clacked against his thigh, now undone, as he took a step toward me and grabbed my knees with his rough hands.

“I said spread them, Joan.” He shook his head a single time, displeased. “Yer my wife. I’ll no have ye disobey me. Not now.”

He had no idea that the only reason I hadn’t obeyed him immediately was because my body wanted him so badly, it was becoming difficult for me to control. Then again, as I watched his greens glint with pleasure as he forced my knees apart, maybe he did.

Maybe he was enjoying this—the opportunity to conquer me. To *take*.

“Fuck’s sake,” he swore as he placed a hand over my pussy. He traced the line of my slit through the lace of my panties from top to bottom with his thumb. “Look at the state of ye. Never felt a cunt so hot as yers before.”

He drew his hand away to suck his thumb into his mouth. His eyes closed, and a growl left his throat as he savored the taste.

“Mm.” He popped his thumb back out of his mouth and reached for me again, curling his fingers around the waistband of the panties. “Naughty lass. Ye’ve already soaked these through.”

I lifted my hips slightly, prepared to help him slide them off of me. But Lock had other plans.

The lace tore apart with a quick jerk of his fingers like it was made out of tissue paper. He ripped them away from me and threw them across the room.

“That’s better.” Lock dropped to his knees and wrapped his hands around my hips. His fingers dug into the meat of my ass as he tugged me to the edge of the bed. “Yer pretty in yer fancy clothes, Joan, but frankly—they’ve only been gettin’ in my way.”

He lowered his lips over my cunt, breathing in my scent. As he exhaled, the heat and humidity washed over my folds.

“How long have ye been wet for me tonight?” he growled. His cheek pressed to my inner thigh, tickling the thin, delicate skin there with the coarse hairs of his beard.

“Please,” I whimpered,

“Answer me, lass. Use yer words. I’m no givin’ ye what ye want until ye do.”

“All night,” I admitted breathily. “And all day, too.”

Finally, he smiled—but his wasn’t a nice smile. Not now.

The curves of his lips were filled with sin.

He nuzzled against my cunt, then slipped his tongue into my folds. Lock purred with satisfaction as he lapped up my honey. Every flick of his tongue rose closer and closer to my clit.

I tangled my fingers in his hair, tugging him upward. I was desperate for release. The kind that only Lock could provide. But Lock wasn’t easily moved. He took his time with my pussy, slipping his tongue into me and teasing me with kisses and licks everywhere *but* my clit.

When his breath finally washed over the sensitive bud, it was swollen and twitching with need. Desperation quickly turned to urgency.

“Lock—” I was entirely ready to plead with him. He’d pushed me too close to becoming the kind of woman I’d never imagined myself capable of before.

The kind of woman who would beg for it. Whimper and bargain, offer up any part of herself just for the promise of release.

But Lock didn’t seem able to hold himself back anymore either. At the sound of his name, his eyes flicked up to meet mine.

In an instant, he moved to my clit. He sucked at it, lashed out at it relentlessly with his tongue until my entire body was trembling violently.

He gave me exactly what I wanted—and he was kind enough that he didn’t even make me ask.

I arched my back and moved my hips against his mouth in response. Every cell of my body felt primed to explode—and when I finally went off, the sensation was so vicious and intense that reality itself slipped away.

In the aftermath, only Lock and I existed. The two of us, and nothing else.

Lock released my clit from his lips with a gentle *pop!* and wiped his mouth clean on the back of his hand. He looked triumphant.

“How did that feel?”

“I...it felt...” I wanted to answer him, but I was still reeling from that orgasm. “I...I can’t describe it, Lock. I’m sorry. I’m trying. But—”

But that was too intense to possibly put into words.

“I see.” He rose to his feet, unzipping his slacks. “Well, then. If ye can’t make that bonnie mouth of yers work for me, I’ll have to put it to better use.”

He shoved the waistband of his boxers down and reached beneath it, drawing out his cock with his fist wrapped around the base of it.

“Oh.” I blinked, drawing back as I tried to take it all in. He was stiff, hard and huge. Thick veins trailed up his shaft, throbbing along with his heartbeat. The swollen, dark pink bell of his tip was already glistening with precum.

“Like it?”

I bit my lip and nodded.

It was gorgeous, and so was he.

Lock took my jaw in his hand and drew me up into a sitting position.

“Open wide, lass,” he ordered. “Stick out yer tongue.”

My lips parted slightly. I poked my tongue out over my lower lip, staring up at him with a little hesitation.

His cock was so big, I wasn’t sure how he was going to fit in my mouth at all.

Lock ran his thumb across my tongue, then pressed it into my mouth. I wrapped my lips around it and sucked instinctively, all too aware of the way he was pumping his cock with his other hand. Slow, measured strokes.

“Mm. Good, lass.” His voice rumbled like thunder in his throat. “But I told ye to open *wide*.”

He dragged his thumb down my tongue as he pulled it out, gently pushing my jaw downward.

I blinked up at him, suddenly feeling strangely...innocent. It wasn’t like I’d never sucked a cock before. That wasn’t it at all.

But this was different somehow.

Maybe, because he was my husband.

Maybe, because he was a fallen angel and a King of Hell.

Maybe just because he was *Lock*.

“There,” he said, satisfied. He slicked his thumb across the upper tip of his cock, wetting it with my saliva. “That’s better. Now...”

I drew in a sharp breath as he moved his cock to my lips.

Lock laid it against my tongue first, smearing his precum up and down my taste buds. His flavor was salt, like a rolling ocean. Gentle and safe in the smoothness of its tides, but no less dangerous for it. I knew at any moment, I could be pulled under those same waves.

He slid his cock up into my mouth, and I wrapped my lips around it in return. He was thick enough to make my jaw ache—but what a delicious ache that was. I closed my eyes and sucked him, relishing the way I could feel his heartbeat against my lips through the pulsing of his veins.

“No, lass,” he chided me. He cradled the back of my head in his hand. “Eyes open. I want to see the look in them while I fuck this bonnie mouth of yers.”

I did as he said. His greens held my gaze with a firmness and intensity that made it hard to even blink as he eased his hips back, then pressed into me once more. My pussy throbbed as he fed his cock to me, inch by inch. I’d been right—it was going to be hard to take all of him. Even as he came

close to bottoming out in my mouth, I could see that my lips were barely halfway down his shaft.

“Touch yourself,” he ordered. “Want to feel ye moanin’ with pleasure by the time I hit the back of yer throat.”

My fingers darted between my legs in response. I was still soaked from my first orgasm. My clit was still almost too sensitive to touch. But as soon as I ran my fingers over its bud, my whole body tensed up with anticipation. Pleasure leapt up through me, from my pussy to my core.

Lock set the pace, and I stroked my clit to match it. We were building up a rhythm so sweet, it made my heart sing and so rough, my eyes watered. With his every thrust, my mind swirled with a Molotov cocktail of endorphins and greed.

I wanted to claim him. To suck him off better than anyone else ever had. I wanted to take every last inch of him down my throat, just to prove that I could—to make him moan and hiss and growl and come harder than he ever had before.

My own little moans sent vibrations up his shaft. His jaw clenched tighter with every one of them. We became each other’s sounding boards. Echoes of each other’s lust. My pleasure reflected off his, amplifying mine, heightening Lock’s in return.

When he finally reached the back of my throat, it was like he’d flipped some secret switch inside me. My orgasm burst through me, a tight, hot bead of light that ricocheted inside me. I finally had to close my eyes—and Lock took that opportunity to push my mouth off his cock so he could settle it between my thighs instead.

“Fuck,” he swore. “Nearly made me come.”

His hands claimed my body, lifting and groping me all at once. He moved me back so my head was resting on the pillows, pinching my nipples and squeezing my hips as he manipulated me to his designs.

“Want to come inside ye, lass,” he growled. “Need it. Need it something fierce.”

He only hesitated to reach into the drawer of the nightstand. From it, he pulled out a black foil package. A condom.

“Cannae risk breeding ye,” he explained. “Though...fuck. Ye look like ye want it badly, lass—and Almighty knows I want to.”

Breed me. My knees clenched tight around his thighs at that word. Not because I wanted to stop him. But because my pussy was so excited at that

notion, the sensation of need was almost too much to bear.

Lock tore the condom open with his teeth and rolled the rubber up his shaft. I clenched my jaw, glaring at it for a moment.

I didn't want him to wear a condom. I hated that fucking condom. I wanted him to take me rough and bareback, until his balls clenched up and pumped his cum deep into my womb.

"Someday, lass," Lock promised. A rogue grin found his lips as he noticed the look of anger in my eyes. "Someday, I will. I promise ye that much. But no tonight."

He slapped his cock down over my pussy and gave it a slow, single thrust. He was showing me how deep inside me he could be if he decided to go balls-deep.

A sudden shot of something—fear? Excitement? I couldn't tell—fired through me.

There was no way I could take all of him. But the look in Lock's eyes told me he was certainly going to try and make me anyway.

"Tonight," he breathed, folding his body over mine. His lips hovered a fraction of an inch over my own. "I'm gonna break ye in."

He kissed me as his hips drew back, crushing my mouth beneath his. His tongue forced its way between my lips, and at the same time, he pressed his cock between my folds and sank his tip into my heat.

Immediately, I was gasping. He stretched me out so perfectly, just on the verge of being too much. It was terrifying. It was thrilling.

I'd been chasing this feeling down for my entire life. A heady, exquisite tightrope walk between danger and pleasure. Holiness and sin.

Lock was my husband, and I was his wife. And at the same time—Lock was my master, and I was his bitch.

"Yer mine," he growled between kisses. His cock pistoned in and out of me, building to an inhuman pace. But that was the beauty of being married a fallen angel, I supposed. Lock wasn't human at all, and he certainly didn't fuck like one. "Yer all fuckin' mine."

The rest was a blur. Teeth and lips and tongues and need. When my third orgasm arched up within me, Lock joined me in it. My pussy spasmed, drawing him deeper and deeper within me. His cock swelled in response, stretching me out even further as his seed spilled from his tip.

He fucked me like the condom had been forgotten. Like he wanted to bury every drop of his cum in my core.

Our eyes stayed locked on each other's the entire time. The temptation to clench mine shut or let them roll back was intense, but I fought the urge and won.

My eyes only closed when he kissed my lips again. Our mouths moved with a devouring passion, hedonistic and raw. Ragged echoes of our lust.

I could have kissed him like that for an eternity. I might have, even—but it was already so hard to catch my breath. Lock seemed to be fighting equally hard to catch his.

He broke the kiss slowly and rolled off of me with a heavy exhale.

"Joan..."

I kept my eyes closed, relishing the afterglow. His scent was all around me, musky and deep. The taste of his lips, salty and sweet all at once, was still on my tongue. If the room was cold, I couldn't feel it. My muscles were liquid. My body was relaxed. Gorgeous waves of heat lapped against my skin, like sitting next to an open fire on a chilly night.

"Joan," Lock said again.

I only smiled and wiggled my body toward his. The closer I was to him, the better that warmth felt.

"Lass," Lock said, more firmly this time. He took my hand in his and lifted it up with a laugh. "Open yer damn eyes. Ye'll want to see this."

I didn't want to open my damn eyes. I wanted to stay in this warm, glowy place that Lock had left me in forever. Or, at least, for the rest of the night.

If I opened my eyes, I'd have to deal with reality again. And reality was so much less fun than the way I'd felt with Lock inside me, ravishing my body and remaking my world.

But as Lock squeezed my fingers in his with a grunt, I knew I'd have to give in to his request before he allowed me to return to the pleasant feeling of being freshly fucked.

I cracked an eye open. Just a sliver, and just the one.

"Oh," I breathed as I took in the sight of my own skin. "What...?"

"Yer powers, lass." Lock ran his hand down the length of my forearm, which was shimmering with thin, flickering flames. "They've already set in."

"Fire." I opened my other eye and forced myself into a sitting position. As I ran my hands down my body, I found flame all around me. It kissed

my skin like a lover, engulfing me from head to toe. “I’m doing this? It’s all mine?”

“Yers, aye.” Lock smiled up at me and swept the flames around my hips aside to place a kiss of his own between my thighs. “Ye’ll need to learn to control it still...but ye seem to have a fair handle on it already. Better than I thought ye would, at any rate.”

“Maybe it’s easier when I’m feeling so relaxed.” I raised a hand in front of my face and settled back into the plush pillows, playing with the fire as it danced between my fingers. “If these are my powers, it’s hard to imagine that they could actually hurt anyone. Who knew being on fire would feel so nice?”

“Ye havenae tried to shoot it at someone ye dinnae like yet,” Lock said with a chuckle. “Knowing yer temper...it may be pleasant now, but I’ve no doubt that once yer good and angry, it willnae stay that way for long.”

When he tugged the condom off his cock and threw it into the trash can next to the bed, I noticed exactly how full it was. Practically to the brim.

The flames died down as we settled together once more, until they were nothing more than a lingering warmth on my skin. I clenched my knees together tight as I folded my body against his.

That condom was all that had prevented him from pumping every last drop of that cum into me. If he would have taken me bareback, his seed would have been dripping out of me right now.

I liked the idea of that more than I wanted to admit.

“Yer bonnie when ye come, Joan.” Lock’s chest swelled and released beneath me as I cuddled against him. All around us, the air was humid with our body heat, perfumed with sweat and musk. “Radiant, ye ken. Most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen.”

“It was incredible.” I hid my face against him so he couldn’t see me smiling. I was never like this, so bubbly and bright. Not even after sex. It was almost embarrassing, how perfect every part of me felt. “You’re not so bad yourself.”

We lay there for a while together, purring and sighing. Enjoying each other’s bodies as we basked in the afterglow.

I might have fallen asleep like that, had a knock at the door not interrupted the moment.

“That’ll be room service,” Lock mumbled into my hair just over my ear. “Are ye hungry, or should I tell ‘em to fuck off?”

“Hungry,” I said with a tired laugh. My stomach rumbled in agreement. “Starving, in fact.”

“Starvin’, are ye?” He nipped at my ear. “I didnae leave ye wantin’, I hope.”

“No.” I turned my head to the side so I could press a kiss to his cheek. “Not in the least.”

Lock didn’t bother to dress before he went to the door. My chest panged with longing as he left my side, but only for a moment. That longing was quickly satisfied as I realized I could admire the view of his thick thighs and firm ass as he walked away.

“You’ve got a tattoo on your ass cheek, you know,” I called after him.

“Do I?” Lock made a show of faux-surprise, craning his neck over his shoulder like this was news to him. “How the hell did that get there?”

I clutched the sheets up around my breasts as I laughed. “That fleur-de-lis isn’t very Scottish of you. Why’d you get it?”

“It’s a good story.” He returned from the doorway with two plates of burgers and fries. His cock was soft again now, but somehow it still looked huge. My husband was a grower *and* a shower, it would seem. “I’ll tell it to ye someday. But for now—time to eat.”

He settled back down onto the bed, arranging the plates on the mattress around us. When he lifted his arm to offer me a place against his chest, I moved against him eagerly.

It felt right, being curled up against him and tucked beneath his firm, thick arms. Everything about being near Lock did. Far too right to possibly be real.

I was falling for him. Even if my head couldn’t quite make sense of it yet, my body was already certain of it. I liked the way he teased me, the way he challenged me. I felt most comfortable when I was near him.

As he offered me a fry from his plate, I opened my mouth for him and bit into it happily.

It was almost insane, how safe I felt in his embrace.

I could fight it, I knew. I could try. Once upon a time, I’d truly believed that there were no such things as losing battles.

But when it came to Lock, even I had to admit that there were some battles that were lost from the start.

And this battle in particular...

I wasn’t sure that I even wanted to win it.

I wanted to be conquered. Be defeated. I wanted to lose to Lock.
To lose myself in him.

LOCK

“Nice try, lass,” I said with a smirk, stepping aside just in time to dodge a furious kick that Joan had obviously intended for my chest. “But ye’ll have to do better than that.”

In the rings of Might on the Inferno’s seventh floor, Joan swung at me like I deserved every knuckle of her punch. I laughed in response, snatched her wrist from the air mid-swing and pulled her body to mine.

We were dancing was what we were doing now. Not so different from fighting when you got right down to it. The movements were largely the same: beats and measures. Well-practiced steps etched into our muscle memories. We kept score the same way a war drummer kept time.

“You could at least let me get a few hits in,” Joan growled as she spun out of my hold.

I watched her twirl with a dark grin of delight on my lips. She was a deadly prima donna, a ballerina en pointe on the blades of knives. As she spun, she unsheathed her wee dagger and came round with it, aiming for my throat.

I leaned back as the blade hissed past me, cutting through air, then grabbed her waist and lowered her into a low dip that left my lips against her collarbone. I nipped at her skin and she arched her back, purring a moan in response.

“Can’t just let ye win,” I said, tracing the line of her neck up to her jaw with the tip of my nose. “Ye wouldnae appreciate it. No satisfaction in

being handed what ye want, is there? Not when I know yer perfectly capable of takin' it instead."

I dropped to one knee and lowered Joan's body to the floor. Around us, others were sparring as well. That was what we did here in Might: fought each other. Made war.

As I folded my body over Joan's small frame, I wondered if she'd let me take her to Lust on the second floor after this so we might make love again as well.

"Don't you think that if I could beat you, I would have by now?" She arched up to me, positioning her lips just so in that way that made it impossible to avoid thoughts of crushing them beneath my own. "I think it's time for me to face it, Lock...you're just too strong for a woman like me to pin down."

"Ach, Joanie..." I smoothed her hair away from her sweat-soaked brow with a tenderness. "Ye've got me pinned down in ways ye don't even understand yet."

She leaned into my touch. A low, gentle purr left her throat as I continued to work my fingers through her hair. I could tell she was tired. She had every right to be—we'd been at this all day so far. After dinner, we'd be back at it nearly all night as well.

For the last week, training like this had become our entire lives. It was the Covenant's latest orders—Joan needed to learn how to control her powers and protect herself from whatever we would be up against to complete our mission, or so they claimed.

As much as I enjoyed our little rolls around the ring together, every day that passed came with some guilt as well.

We worked each other over from dawn until well into the night. When we got back to our room, we were usually too tired to do anything but fuck to wind down, shower and fall asleep.

But I hadn't forgotten my promise to Joan. As soon as we'd finished our work here—as soon as we were given so much as a single day of rest without any orders to follow or demands to meet—we'd go to Ava's home, just liked we'd agreed.

We'd cure Ava's mother. I'd done my research already, and I was a man of my word. According to the most ancient of tomes in the libraries of Heresy on the sixth floor, it wouldn't even be difficult.

All we'd need was an object that Ava's mother wore and a single drop of demonic blood.

Knowing how simple it would be, it was with great annoyance that I met the Covenant's daily command for us to stay here and train. I wouldn't have bothered if we'd had any choice in the matter.

I didn't like putting such important business off—especially since we still didn't know what we were supposed to be stealing yet. And keeping my word to Joan was the most important business I could imagine.

She was the most important thing in my entire universe.

As I stared down at her delicate features, shimmering with her sweat, the things I wanted to do next...uncountable.

I wanted to come clean with her. Awaken every memory we had together, from every lifetime. Show her that it wasn't always like this—we weren't always forced to dance on the Covenant's strings, fulfilling their most idiotic whims.

I wanted to bury my nose in her hair and ask for her forgiveness. For ever losing her—for ever letting her die, across any of our lives together. For letting something so perfect and precious to me ever slip between my fingers and slide away on the sands of fate.

I wanted to lick the salt from her skin, force her thighs apart and take her hard and fast, right there in the fighting ring. The same way we'd done it all those years ago, when the world had been a simpler place and Joan had been fully, willingly mine.

"You're staring, Lock," she breathed.

"Aye," I admitted. "Hard not to. It's a nice view."

"You like it?" She wiggled her hips beneath me and batted her eyelashes prettily.

In my core, a throb of suddenly imperative need resounded.

I swallowed hard and nearly choked.

"Aye," I rasped. "There's not much ye can do that I don't like."

"Mm. In that case...how about..." Joan's eye shifted in an instant, changing from soft and alluring to wicked all at once. "*This*."

She thrust her palm at my face. I felt the heat begin to rise off of it just in time.

The battle was back on.

I jerked to the side to avoid Joan's attack just in the nick of time. She responded quickly, using my own momentum to turn me onto my back

with her thigh.

Just like that, I wasn't on top anymore at all. Joan was. She straddled my waist and pinned me down with her forearm across my throat.

I nearly laughed.

She'd caught me entirely off guard.

"How was that?" she asked, grinning. "Good enough for you yet?"

I returned her grin with one of my own. "Aye. Perfect, in fact. I'm only wonderin'..."

"Yes?" she said, innocent and coy once more now.

"Ach, maybe it's nothin'. Just...I'm wonderin' ow long have ye been able to make the flames come from yer hands at will."

She grinned again and laughed. "A few days now. I've been practicing in the shower. Just wanted to wait for the perfect moment to catch you entirely by surprise."

"And here I am," I agreed. "Entirely surprised."

"Are you?" She lowered her face down toward mine, hovering over me and looking deep into my eyes. "Don't lie."

"It was a verrae good trick, lass," I assured her. My gaze strayed to her mouth. She had the finest lips I'd ever known. Full and utterly kissable, even when she was laughing at my expense. "Ye've finally got me at yer mercy."

"I do, don't I?" Joan mused. "I wonder what I should claim for my reward."

Her eyes were on my lips now, too.

If that was the kind of prize she was angling for, it would be easy to lose with grace.

Losing myself in Joan's kiss was all I ever wanted to do.

"Take it, then," I dared her. "Whatever ye want from me, mo leannan—it's yers."

"I'd like to," she said. Her lips were closer now. So close, I could feel the humidity of her breath mingling with my own. "But...I'm not sure if I should."

"To the victor go the spoils," I quipped. "What's holdin' ye back from claiming what's yers by right?"

"Maybe...maybe I love you," she breathed against my lips. "Maybe you've fucked me so well that I'm finally smitten like a nervous, giggling

schoolgirl, and now I'm afraid that every time I kiss you, it's only going to make things that much worse."

"An interesting hypothesis," I purred back to her. My body was straining to claim those lips she was teasing me with. But I stopped myself. The only thing better than a kiss stolen from Joan was one she gave me willingly. For such a prize...I was sure I could find some way to restrain myself. "Has it occurred to ye that maybe I love ye as well?"

"It might have," she admitted. "Maybe. A little. Hypothetically, of course."

I lifted my finger beneath her jaw and stroked it beneath her chin in a come-hither motion. "What if we made this a little less hypothetical?"

She licked her lips, then brushed them against mine in a ghost of a kiss. "You say it first."

"I love ye, Joan." It wasn't a hard thing to say. Even for a fallen angel, things that were so entirely true rarely were.

"Mm." The sound of that moan in her throat dripped with pleasure. "I love you, too."

Slowly, she pressed her lips to mine. Her kiss was firm, but tentative. Like she was feeling it out. Searching for some hint of falsehood, some reason to take those words back.

As the kiss deepened, I knew she wouldn't find any.

Our tongues tangled together as we let our hands roam over each other's bodies. When I summoned flame at my fingertips to brush down her spine, she returned the favor, kissing my cheeks with fire from her palms that was all her own.

Her cunt was pressed hard against my cock. I stiffened in response. She tasted like fresh, dark berries, ripened in the sunshine and crushed to let their juices flow. Her heat was palpable, and not just from the fire that danced around us.

She was hot for me, and I for her. It wouldn't be hard to take her here like this, in the fighting ring of Might while others battled all around. They wouldn't pay us any mind—and even if they did, we wouldn't care.

It would be far from the first time we'd fucked in this ring.

Despite the annoyances of all the training we'd been doing, I had to hand it to the Covenant.

As I slid my hand up her body, from her hip to her breast, for a moment it felt like we'd never lost any memories or time at all.

But when I cupped Joan's breast, she hissed and drew back sharply.

"Lass?" My heart stopped for a moment at the sound of her pain. "Did I hurt ye? What's wrong?"

She clenched her eyes shut tight and shook her head.

"I just had another...vision. Or something. Whatever those are."

"Ah." I'd thought that I would be able to control what Joan remembered, but once again she was proving me wrong. In the absence of memories from our past together in this life, Joan was recalling our love from her past lives instead. "What did ye see?"

"I was...in some ancient city somewhere," she said. "It felt like Greece. There was an army at the gates and all the soldiers were away. Everyone but you. I led the women into battle and you fought by my side."

"Arachidamia. Queen of Sparta." I remembered her well. She'd been fierce as ever on that day. When her advisers told her to shelter the women and prepare for a long siege, she'd taken my sword in her hand and told them that if they were too craven to defend their women, the women would have to defend themselves. "Ye would have liked her. The two o' ye are an awful lot alike."

Exactly alike, in fact. One and the same.

"That's what I'm worried about," Joan admitted, pulling back and looking away. "I think I know what those visions are, Lock."

My breath caught in my throat. Joan was clever, of course, and she'd seen enough of Hell that not much escaped her. But if she figured things out before I told her the truth...

I didn't want her to feel like our entire relationship this time around was a lie.

"What do ye think they are, lass?"

Her dark eyes sought out my greens again. "Honestly?"

"Honestly."

She sighed. "I think I'm seeing memories of all the other women you've fucked."

Ah. So no—she hadn't caught on quite yet.

I arched an eyebrow. "And does that make ye jealous?"

"No," she said immediately. But then, after a beat... "Well. Yes. A little. Maybe."

"Ye've nothin' to be jealous of," I pointed out. "I've told ye before. All those women are gone—and yer the one who's here with me now. Ye wear

my ring. Not them. Yer my wife.”

“I don’t mind that you’ve been with other women, Lock. It’s *seeing* them that bothers me. Can you imagine how you would feel if, every time I kissed you or made you come, you somehow remembered...I don’t know. Some creepy frat boy trying to feel me up at a college party?”

“I’d feel angry, most like.” I let a hint of danger glint in my eye. “Furious, really. Why? Do they have names? When we’re done with yer contract here, I’m more than happy to track them down, give them a little reminder of how to treat ladies. If ye like.”

“Lock...no.” She glanced to the side—imagining exactly how I might impart such lessons on horny, overprivileged bastards like that, perhaps. “Well. Maybe. We can talk about that later.”

I winked at her. “I’ll keep it in mind.”

Joan let out a breath of a laugh then swatted at my face gently. “Stop that. I’m trying to tell you something.”

“And yer being verrae compelling about it.” I shifted my hips up slightly, reminding her of exactly how close her cunt was to my cock in our current position. “Ye’ve all my attention, Joan.”

“Yes. I can see that.” She closed her eyes and moved her hips in response to my own. She had my attention for sure now. Had my cock standing at it, in fact. “I want you, Lock. When I said I love you...I meant it. I really did.”

“Aye.” I wound my hands around her delicate wrists, not to pull her closer or to push her away, but just so I could hold her. Holding Joan felt like the most right thing in all the world. “I love ye too. I’ve no reason to lie.”

“But when...when those visions happen, I’m not just *seeing* the other women you’ve said those words to, Lock.” Her eyes opened again, tinged with a sadness she seemed reluctant to show. “I *am* them. I can feel how much they loved you. I can feel how much you loved them back, too. I don’t grudge you the relationships you’ve had before me—how could I? But...” A low growl of frustration rumbled through her throat. “Maybe it’s stupid. Maybe it doesn’t matter. But part of me...it wonders if maybe you loved them more than me. If maybe they loved you better than I can, too.”

She bit her lip and looked away. I knew how hard that must have been for her to admit. It was brave of her to do it anyway.

No matter what her name was, where she'd been born, how we'd found each other or in what way our love story unfurled... Joan was always full of courage. She was the bravest woman I'd ever known.

"Look at me, mo leannan." I raised my hand to her cheek and turned her face back toward mine. "I'm glad ye told me how ye've been feelin'. I'm sorry that I've made ye feel like this at all."

"It's not your fault, Lock."

"No," I said. "In a way, it verrae much is."

Joan frowned. "How could it possibly—"

"There's somethin' I've been keepin' from ye, Joanie. Somethin'... important. I've been waitin' for the right moment to tell ye, but so far...it hasnae come. At least..." I ran my thumb across her cheekbone. She had such lovely bone structure—such a hardness to her angles softened only by the beauty of her features. Like a warrior queen, lovely and fierce all at once. "At least, no until now."

"I..." Joan mulled my words over for a moment. "I understand that there are things you haven't been able to tell me, Lock. But if you're ready now..."

"Aye. I am." I smiled up at her. It was a difficult thing, to look at her without finding my lips curled into a grin. But beneath that smile...it would have been a lie to say that I wasn't nervous.

What would she make of me, when she saw the man I'd once been? Would she love me less for it now, once she knew exactly how perfect things had been between us before all was lost?

It didn't matter, I supposed. If I lost her now, at least I'd done so while telling her the truth.

Joan had been brave, telling me how she felt.

I was no coward. If I wanted to deserve her, I'd be brave too.

"I'll show ye the truth," I told her. "Ye've more than earned it now. But, Joanie..."

She closed her eyes and leaned into my touch. "Yes, Lock?"

"The man yer about to see isnae the man I am now." I'd imagined saying those words to her a thousand times over at this point. I thought them to myself every day. It sent a pang through my chest to admit it out loud. "If ye find that ye love him more than me...ye need to know that he's dead. He died years ago. I can't be him again."

Slowly, her eyes opened. Her lips parted softly, like she was about to say something tender. Something sweet.

Maybe her words would soothe the pain of all the years we'd lost. Maybe she could resurrect me—bring that better version of myself back from the dead after all.

“Lock...” Her brow knitted together and a quiet laugh leapt from her throat. “What the fuck are you talking about?”

After a moment, I found myself grinning in return.

I might have changed after all this time—but not Joan.

“Just kiss me, ye silly lass.” I wove my fingers through her hair and pulled her lips down to mine. Our mouths moved to caress each other, smiles against smiles.

She hadn't changed at all.

JOAN

Somewhere In A Memory...

The hotel room was lavish. Everything in this new world I'd stumbled into was.

"Hey, Joanie." Lock leaned in the doorway while I stood there in a plush white bathrobe that probably cost more than my monthly utilities bills. "How are ye?"

"Enjoying the view." I cocked my head to the window behind me. Lock and his friends had booked us the finest rooms in the entire Bellagio, the ones reserved only for the highest of high rollers, billionaires and celebrity guests. From the windows, I could see the entirety of the Vegas Strip below. It either made me feel like a complete imposter, or like the queen of the fucking world. I still hadn't decided which. "Yourself?"

"I'm fine. Kind of ye to ask." I'd never heard of a demon with a Scottish brogue before. As of a few nights ago, I'd never believed in demons at all. But that had all changed rather quickly in the last couple of days, and there was no denying that his Robert Burns bit suited him. The only problem was that Lock's accent, combined with the twinkling greens of his eyes, made my stomach do things that I wasn't accustomed to. Cartwheels and backflips. I still didn't know quite what to make of that

either. It felt embarrassing—and when I fought past that, it felt...kind of good. “Do ye mind if I come in?”

“Of course not.” I stepped back and held out a hand to welcome him into the room. He’d paid for it, after all. It seemed silly to tell him no. “What’s up?”

“Just checkin’ on ye is all. I heard that Bea and Ava were spending their evening with a personal shopper. Was surprised to hear that ye weren’t plannin’ on joining them.” He stepped into the room and looked around it, then laughed. “Were ye intendin’ to clean instead?”

I winced as I realized what a mess I’d made of the place. My clothes and shoes were tossed around the room with reckless abandon. He must’ve thought I was an absolute slob.

“I’ve never had so many clothes to wrangle before,” I admitted as I stooped down, scrambling to gather up at least a little of the mess. “I only really packed a few dresses for this trip. All the other things you boys have had sent up for me has been, ah...let’s say more than I’m used to managing.”

“I can see that.” Lock moved to the nightstand, where a pair of black lace panties were draped over a lampshade. He plucked them off of it and held them up with a smirk. “These yers?”

The blood drained from my face. *Fuck.*

“Give me those.” I rushed across the room to snatch them from Lock’s hands. Those were the panties I’d been wearing last night when we went to Paradise, the strip club that served as a gateway to Heaven.

The night when I’d first set eyes on Lock. He’d been wearing a leather jacket and rugged blue jeans. Exactly my type. The way he’d looked at me when he kissed my hand...it had done something to me. Something stupid.

I hadn’t felt entirely in my right mind ever since.

“Looks like ye had a wild night,” he said, relinquishing the panties with a chuckle.

“No wilder than any of the rest of us.” Ava, Bea and I had arrived in Vegas for our friend Evie’s wedding to what had to be the most unscrupulous man on the entire face of the Earth. Maybe in all of Heaven and Hell as well, for that matter. Shortly after meeting Lock, Evie had caught Adam in a cocaine-fueled orgy with an entire fleet of angels.

Not really marriage material, frankly.

I felt much better about the man that Evie had ended up marrying last night instead. Even if Luke Dawnstar *was* the Devil—quite literally—at least Satan only had eyes for his bride.

“Did ye have a man in here, once we got back?” Lock asked with a measured kind of curiosity as I stuffed the panties back into the depths of my carry-on suitcase.

“Of course not.” I zipped the suitcase back up and shoved it aside.

“A woman, then?” Lock arched an eyebrow. “Not that I’m judgin’, ‘course, but—”

“No, Lock.” I crossed my arms over my chest and narrowed my eyes at him. “Not that it matters, but I’m perfectly capable of throwing my own panties onto the lampshade. Though, a girl has to wonder—why do you care? I’m sure a demon like you had all sorts of supermodels and showgirls in *your* bed last night.”

With muscles like his and eyes like *those*, Lock could’ve had any woman in Las Vegas if he’d wanted. Any woman in the entire world, for that matter.

He had no room to talk.

“Me? Nah.” Lock took a step closer to me. “I’m quite particular about who I share my bed with. S’pose ye could say I’ve got a type—and no a common one, neither.”

“Is that so?”

“Aye.” Another step closer to me. “It is.”

“And what might that be?” I scoffed. “Let me guess. Pretty blondes with thick lips and huge tits?”

“They’re all right,” he admitted. Another step. “But no. Not quite my style.”

My breath caught in my throat as he raised his hand to my short, dark bob. He took a lock of my hair between his fingers and rubbed it gently, bringing out its luster in the light.

“Yer verrae pretty, Joan,” he whispered. He was close to me now. Close enough to grab me and shove me up against the wall. Close enough to wrap me up in his arms and hold me tight. “Beautiful. Fierce.”

My heart leapt in my chest at the compliment, but I made sure it didn’t show on my face. “Bet you say that to all the girls.”

“And do ye look at all the boys the way I keep catchin’ ye lookin’ at me, I wonder?” He dropped my hair and moved his hand to my cheek. His

palm was callused and his caress was rough.

I didn't mind.

I liked rough. Maybe a little too much.

"Why are you really here, Lock?" I was careful not to answer his question. Lying to a fallen angel seemed like a bad idea—but telling the truth to one might be even more dangerous.

"I think that's clear, is it no?" He smirked down at me. "Ye asked what my type was. It's you."

"You're going to have to be more clear than that, I'm afraid." *Say it*, I challenged him with my eyes. *If that's what you want, then don't be a coward. Fucking say it. Prove to me that you're worth everything I want to give you.*

"I want ye, Joan." He held my gaze like, with only his eyes, he could clasp a collar around my neck and I'd place my leash in his hand in return. "I want to fuck ye. I want to own ye. Say the word and it's done."

"Maybe I'm not that kind of girl." My body tensed at his words.

Of course I wanted him to fuck me. That wasn't the problem.

But to be *owned*—now *that* was the part I wouldn't settle for.

No one owned me. No one ever could.

Not even a man like him.

"Should I apologize?" he asked, smoothing a thumb across my cheekbone.

"It wouldn't suit you." I shrugged like I didn't care, but already warmth was filling my core. "You wouldn't mean it?"

"Should I go?"

I drew in a breath. "I didn't say that."

"Then...I should stay?"

I bit my lip. Evie and her new, hellish husband was its own thing. She made her own choices. Marrying Luke kept her safe from all the evil forces that wanted her dead—and even if she had other, more romantic feelings toward him, at least he was a better choice for her than Adam had ever been.

But falling into bed with a being of Hell myself...that seemed like a dangerous choice indeed.

He wanted to own me—but I couldn't be tied down. Not that easily.

"For the night," I told Lock in a whisper. As his smirk turned into a genuine smile, my eyes narrowed further. "*Only* for the night. This can't

ever happen again.”

“For the night, then.” His lips lowered toward mine. He caressed my mouth with his, just a ghost of a kiss at first.

But then I leaned in. Let myself go. Our mouths crushed together and our hands began to explore each other’s bodies, gentle at first, then rough and hard.

I SHOULD’VE KNOWN that one night would never be enough.

“HIT me like that again and I’ll punish ye for it,” Lock warned me, his face mere inches away from mine. Blood dripped down from his lips onto my cheek as his body pinned mine down on the mat of our sparring ring in Might. His hand was curled around my throat. His green eyes were fierce. Full of flame and dark intent. “Don’t think that I won’t.”

“Don’t let me hit you next time, then,” I teased through my smirk. It had felt good to finally land a blow on Lock. He moved so fast, usually even I couldn’t best him. It was why I’d worn my tightest sports bra to practice with him today. As soon as I’d noticed him staring at my tits, I’d taken advantage of the moment and caught him off guard. “As for punishment...what’s stopping you now?”

“Do ye want me to punish you?” The fire in Lock’s eyes shifted from fury to eager hunger. I’d caught his interest, it seemed.

Good. I wanted all of his attention focused on me.

“Oh, of course not.” I arched a brow, goading him. “I’m not sure you have it in you anyway. For a fallen angel, you’re awfully soft.”

“Soft, am I?” Lock shifted his hips against mine in a deliciously sinful way that quickly proved that soft was the *last* thing Lock was. His cock was stiff against my belly, long and thick and rock fucking hard. “Choose yer next words with care, Joan. It would be a shame if ye made me do somethin’ ye’d come to regret.”

“What if I didn’t regret it?” I challenged him. “Show me what you’ve got.”

His hand tightened around my throat as he claimed my lips. Our tongues tangled together and the iron of his dark, demonic blood passed between his mouth and my own. In an instant, we were tearing each other’s

clothes off right there in the ring, and to hell with anyone who might have been watching.

I didn't care. I wanted him. Needed him.

If this was my punishment for distracting him, Lock needed a lesson in what discipline looked like.

As far as I was concerned, this was nothing but reward.

THERE WAS ONLY one way to truly punish someone like me: taking away the things I loved the most.

I STRODE with purpose through the armory of Pandemonium, the castle at the center of Hell. Fury burned through my veins as the tang of adrenaline flooded my mouth.

I needed a weapon. Maybe more than one.

I needed as many violent objects as I could carry.

I had an angel to kill.

"Which one these will end him?" I knew my enemy's name well. *Michael*. He'd been hunting me and my friends for months now. He'd ruined every good thing we'd tried to build in our new lives as humans with a true knowledge of the existence of Heaven and Hell.

Now, he wanted to take all of that away—and I wasn't going to let him.

I couldn't. I wouldn't.

Now, there was simply too much to lose.

"Ye can't kill him, lass." Lock grabbed the handle of the axe I'd just decided was the perfect tool for lopping off an angel's head and wrenched it away from me. "And even if ye could, it wouldnae be any use."

"He's threatening Evie. He's threatening her fucking *baby*, Lock." I'd already been shut out of the battle that would determine the fate of Hell. The last thing I was going to do was let the angels have their way with our lives in the aftermath. "He's a bastard and he deserves to die."

"Yer no wrong," Lock assured me. As I dove for the axe again, he tossed it aside and grabbed my shoulders, holding me in place. "But do ye no think that everything yer feelin', I've already felt? If it was as simple as killin' him, I would've already. Ye ken me better than anyone, Joan. Surely ye ken that, too."

I fought my urge to look up at him. To meet his eyes.

I was in love with Lock. The only true love of this kind I'd ever had existed between his heart and mine.

If I met his eyes, I knew I'd cry.

I didn't want to shed tears over this. I wanted to kill everything that stood in our path, until there was nothing left to stop us. No one in all of Heaven and Hell left to tell us no.

"I don't want to forget you, Lock." I kept my gaze fixed on the floor. "I won't. What can we do? There has to be a way."

"There is no other way, mo leannan." Lock cupped my cheek and turned my face up to his. "If there was, we wouldnae be havin' this conversation. The bairn's safety for yer memories. That's the price. The deal's already been struck."

I clenched my eyes shut and bit my tongue until I tasted blood. "Okay. After, then."

"After?"

"After," I repeated. "I won't remember you, Lock. But you'll remember me. Won't you?"

"How the fuck could I forget ye, lass?" Lock took my head between both his hands and pressed his fingertips hard against my scalp. "You, Joan Bouchard—I could never forget ye. Yer in my heart. In my soul. Not even angels could stop that."

"Then don't let them have this either." My chest heaved with a panic that I couldn't give into. We needed a plan. A good one. And fast. "Once my memories are gone, find some way to bring me back to you. I don't care how you have to do it. As long as you know that Evie's baby will stay safe—"

"That's a tall order, Joan," Lock warned me.

"Well, you're a very tall man."

He let out a pained laugh. I could hear the tears in his throat. Even with my eyes shut tight, I could feel the same kind of tears burning against my lashes as well.

"I'll do it, then," he promised. "Doesn't matter how. I'll find a way."

"Good." Finally, I let my eyes open. Hot, wet tears streamed down my cheeks as soon as my gaze met his. I focused on his greens, memorizing their exact color. Every swirl of them, the flecks of gold, the look of love that burned through them—a love that not even angels could take away.

Not forever. Just for now. “And when you do—I need you to promise me something else.”

“Anything, Joan.” Lock’s voice was tight and full of hurt. “Anything ye want from me...it’s yers. Name it.”

“When you find me again,” I whispered, “I don’t want you to make me remember. Not right away. If can’t remember you, then dammit—we’re making the most of it.”

“What are ye askin’ for? I dinnae understand.”

“Falling for you was the most profound thing I’ve ever done, Lock.” I forced a breath into my lungs and gripped the front of his shirt tight in my fist. “When you find me—and you will—I want you to make me fall in love with you again.”

He smiled as he moved his lips against mine. It was a tearful kiss, and a heartbreaking one. But not a kiss goodbye.

I didn’t believe in goodbyes. Not between people like us.

This wasn’t the end. It couldn’t be.

I wouldn’t be able to fight my way back to Lock when this was done—but he could.

He would.

And when he was done—when I was his once more—I’d never let the universe tear us apart ever again.

JOAN

My eyes snapped open as the memories left me. They burned with tears that I hadn't realized I'd been crying. When I tried to draw a breath, it got clogged in my throat.

"Mo leannan? Joan?" Lock cupped my cheeks in his rough hands, staring up at me with concern. "Are ye all right?"

I swallowed back my tears, nodded, then folded my body over his. I clung to his broad shoulders and buried my face in the crook of his neck, nuzzling my way into that space where my head fit so perfectly against him, it was like he'd been made for me. Or maybe, like I'd been made for him.

"I'm all right," I whispered. "I just... I... I didn't..."

"Shh." Lock smoothed my hair down over the back of my head and made soft, soothing noises as he held me tight. "I've got ye. I've got ye now, and I'll never let ye go again."

"How did I miss it, Lock? I don't understand." My head was still reeling from everything I'd just seen. From everything I'd just *been*. Years of being in love with Lock. Years of being his friend, his lover—whatever it was that we'd called ourselves. All of them, gone for so long. Now that Lock had given them back to me, it was almost too much to take in. "I should have remembered sooner. I should have realized—all this time, you've been...*you*."

“How could ye have, lass?” Lock murmured into my hair. “Yer memories were taken from ye. Ye cannae blame yerself—ye did nothing wrong.”

“Neither did you, Lock.” He had to see that. How could he not? “We were up against the impossible. We gave them up so that...so Evie’s child could be safe. That isn’t your fault either.”

“Well, if it’s no my fault, and it’s no yers...”

“It’s not anyone’s.” I cuddled deeper into his embrace, breathing him in. The scent of his sweat, iron and earth, seemed so familiar to me now. It was like coming home after a long time away. Lying down in a bed I hadn’t even realized was my own. “I just...I wish I hadn’t been so stupid. We could have saved ourselves so much time...”

“Ye asked me not to make ye,” Lock reminded me. “Ye wanted to fall in love with me again. At times, I didnae think it was even going to be possible...”

“Of course I was going to fall in love with you again, you...you stupid, stubborn bastard!” I straightened suddenly and shoved his chest with my hands. “How could I not? Even without memories...I’m still me, and you’re still you.”

“I told ye, Joan.” Lock shook his head solemnly. “I’m no the man from those memories. He died the day he lost ye. I’m simply the man who must atone for his sins.”

There was regret in his voice. It didn’t suit him.

I wiped the tears from my eyes—how embarrassing—and fixed my gaze into a glare instead.

“Lock, I love you. I loved you then, and I love you now. Which is why I’m going to bother saying this at all—and I’m only going to say it once.” The tears were still welling up on my water line, but I’d finally found a way to slow them. At least, for a little while. “You’re being a fucking idiot.”

“I...I am no!” In an instant, Lock returned my glare. “I’m bein’ sincere, ye wee hellcat! Pourin’ my heart out for ye, aren’t I? Barin’ my fuckin’ soul—”

“In the most ridiculous way possible.” I shook my head, refusing him his self-pity. “You’re lucky that your other instincts are so good, Lock, because the only way you’ve changed that I can see is that you’ve gone absolutely blind during the time we were apart.”

“Oh, I can see just fine, Joanie,” he snapped back at me. “I can see ye takin’ pity on me. I lost ye—and after all that promising I did that I would never let that happen again. I lost ye, and now—what? I live on by the grace of your good heart?”

My lips twitched. The emotions coursing through me right now were too many and too varied to count—but one bubbled up over all others.

I couldn’t help it.

I laughed.

“Ach, and now look. Yer laughin’ at me!”

“Yes, Lock.” I moved my face to his cheek and ran my thumb down the thick hairs of his beard, following their grain. “I’m laughing at you. Because what you’re not seeing is the facts right now. I remember you as you were now, and I know you as you are. I loved you, and I fell for you again, because you’re the same man. The same stupid, handsome, ridiculous man I’ve always loved. Simple as that.”

“Well... Well, ye can’t... I...” Lock’s eyes met mine as he struggled to search for the right words to argue with me. It didn’t take him long to give up. “Ye coulda at least let me have a whinge about it for a while longer, Joanie. I’ve been tearin’ myself apart without ye for good time now. Woulda been polite to at least indulge me for a bit.”

“Maybe,” I admitted, running my fingers through his hair now. He *was* stupid, and he *was* handsome. He was passionate, and brutal, and perfect—and above all else, he was mine. “But I think it might be more fun for us both if I indulged you in other ways instead. Maybe...back up in the room?”

Lock’s eyes narrowed for a moment. Then, like rays of sunshine breaking through storm clouds, he smiled.

“Ye drive a hard bargain, lass.” Lock shook his head. His voice was half exasperation, half disbelief. But regardless, his smile didn’t fade. “Fuck’s sake, I love ye. I truly do. So...aye. What matters is that yer mine again now. C’mon.”

He threw me off of him with ease, then picked me up and tossed me over his shoulder like I weighed nothing at all.

“What do you think you’re doing?” I kicked my feet, laughing through the last of my tears.

“I believe ye were just implying that I should stop my whinging and take ye to bed,” Lock answered as he carried me out of the ring. “So I

s'pose what I'm doing is taking ye to bed."

IN A BETTER UNIVERSE, that's exactly what would have happened. Lock would have carried me to bed, ravished my body, left me purring and sweet and more in love with him than ever before—especially now that I knew exactly what we'd have. What we could someday have again.

But as soon as we got into the room, it became apparent that we weren't living in the better universe at all.

The world we lived in had demands of us—and all of them seemed to arrive at the worst possible time.

"What is that?" I asked after Lock had deposited me onto my feet once more. I pointed to a wide, thin black box on the bed, bound up with sleek red ribbon.

Lock glared at it like it had offended him. I supposed it had.

After all, he was supposed to be fucking me on that bed right now.

Couldn't blame him. It was offending me too.

"Covenant shite?" he guessed, glancing to me.

"Ugh. Yeah. Probably." I walked over and picked it up. It wasn't too heavy, but it felt sinister. Probably because it had been gift wrapped in the colors of Hell itself. "Do I dare open it?"

Lock sighed. "If ye don't, I will."

We sat side by side on the bed as I unwound the ribbon. I held my breath as I cracked open the top.

Inside was a pair of black Louboutins with their infamous red bottoms, a manilla envelope, and a smaller card.

"Good work. You're finally ready." I read the script on the card aloud. *"Your targets are within the envelope enclosed. Meet with Mammon and Beelzebub for dinner at Indulgence at 8:00 p.m. for your final briefing, then prepare yourselves to gamble at Avarice tonight."*

"Fuck's sake." Lock reached for the envelope. "Targets? I thought we were pulling a heist."

"You don't think they want us to kill someone, do you?" It would be a first for the Covenant—at least, for me—but I didn't put anything beyond them. Not anymore.

"No," Lock said with a frown as he looked over the contents of the envelope. "No exactly, at least."

He handed me a picture. In it, four men wearing motorcycle helmets sat a poker table in Avarice, playing cards. A single word had been scratched into the glossy surface of the image: *MIDNIGHT*.

"What does it mean?" I looked to Lock, confused.

"Nothin' good," he assured me. With a finger, he tapped on each of the four men in the photo. "These are the Four Riders of the Apocalypse, lass. Once a year, they gather together in Avarice to play cards. During the last hand, they bet their souls."

"Why? Why would anyone do that?" If these were the Four Horsemen from Revelations, they should have been more preoccupied with sowing death and destruction across the Earth than they were with card games. Right?

"Fun, I reckon. They've been waiting for their ride for a long while." Lock shook his head. "This is Leviathan's doing. I've no doubt. We should keep an eye out for him tonight. I wouldnae be surprised if he reared his ugly head as well."

"But the heist..."

"There was never any heist, Joan." Lock took the picture from my hands and shook his head at it. "We've been lied to. Shouldnae be surprised."

"So...the Covenant wants us to gamble with the Four Riders tonight for our souls instead." I was frowning now too. "That sounds... dangerous."

"As dangerous as anything else here in Hell."

"Are they trying to get rid of us, Lock?"

"I dinnae think so," said Lock. He set the photo aside. "They wouldnae want to lose us to any of the Riders. I think they want us to win."

"Then we'll just have to, won't we?"

"If our souls are forfeit, we have no other choice." Lock turned to me and took my hands in his. "But we don't both need to make this gamble, Joanie. Ye let me play for it, aye? Ye dinnae need to go riskin' yerself."

"I don't want *you* risking *yourself* either," I insisted. "This goes both ways, Lock. If you can imagine how much it would hurt you if I lost my soul to one of the Riders, then you can imagine how much it would hurt me if your soul was lost, too."

"That's sweet, lass." Lock released my hands to cup my cheeks. He pressed a kiss to my forehead. The warmth of it lingered even after he'd

pulled away. “But yer no made of the same stuff I am.”

“You don’t think I can handle a few rounds of cards?” Lock and I had been practicing more than just fighting lately, after all. We’d often played each other in between sparring matches. I was nearly as good as Lock now.

Lock gave a rough laugh. “Nah, lass. That’s no it. Yer a bonnie gambler, but yer still human, remember? If ye lose yer soul to one of the Riders, ye’ll be pulled into their domain. They’re no evil, see. Sometimes, they’re even friends. The Fourth in particular has helped us out of a fair few pinches in the past. But rules are rules—and I dinnae want my wife to end up under the control of another man. Dinnae even want to risk that.”

“And they wouldn’t have control over you if you lost?”

“I’m a King of Hell,” Lock reminded me. “Too powerful to be owned like that. It wouldnae be ideal, mind. But better me than you.”

I met his eyes. He was probably right, but that didn’t mean I felt any better about this.

My worry must have been written all over my face, because Lock returned my gaze with a sigh and pulled me onto his lap.

“Look, lass. I know this is far from what we were expecting.” He wrapped me up tight in his arms and buried his nose in my hair. “None of this is how I wanted things to go, truth be told.”

“I don’t want you to sacrifice yourself for me.” I cuddled against his chest and pressed my ear to his skin so I could hear his heartbeat. My own was fluttering away with a quiet panic, but Lock’s was steady and strong.

“Then we won’t lose,” Lock promised. “People like us, Joan...we dinnae give up. We’re stubborn and we’re ruthless and we fight like hell. Even when the odds are against us and the chips are down. We fight—and we win. I willnae accept any other possibility—and neither should you.”

“And when we do win?” I wasn’t fully sold on Lock’s plan yet, but I knew I could get there.

He was right. We were too obstinate not to beat this.

It was another thing I loved about him. He was the only person I’d ever met whose willpower matched my own.

“We take the souls of the Four Riders and we get the fuck out of this place.” Lock pulled back and smiled down at me. “I’ve had a careful look at yer contract, lass. Mammon is a clever devil when it comes to these matters, but he must have been distracted when he was finishing things up.

Yer terms are only to complete the mission. It says nothing about givin' up the goods once we're done."

Slowly, I found myself returning his smile. "So...in a way, we really are pulling off a heist after all."

"Biggest heist I've ever known." Lock pressed a kiss to my lips. "And I cannae think of a better partner for it. No one else I would rather have at my side than my wife."

"Your wife." Those words warmed me. "I really am, aren't I?"

"Ye heard my vows, Joan." Lock chuckled as he ran his hand down from my waist to my hip. "Even the parts I didn't mean for ye to hear at all. I love ye. I vowed it before the Almighty Himself. I love ye, and yer mine."

Lock kissed me again, and the warmth in my heart turned to a fierce, passionate heat.

I loved him too. I was his.

Together, there was nothing we couldn't do.

Even stealing from Hell itself.

LOCK

She wore a red dress to dinner. It hugged her arse like the hands of a possessive boyfriend, capturing every shift of her hips and the perfection of her curves.

“When we’re done here, I’m tearing that skirt in two,” I warned her as we moved past the tables of the other diners in Indulgence. We were heading for the VIP room at the back. Already, I was on edge—and in more ways than one.

I didn’t want to dine with devils tonight. I wanted to be upstairs in the bath with Joan’s heart-shaped ass in my lap, riding my cock cowgirl style while I bit her neck and the bubbles clung to her tits.

And as little as I wanted to spend the evening entertaining Mammon and Beelzebub again, I wanted Joan there even less.

“Wait until we get back up to the room, at least. We should have a little time to spare before we have to go down to Avarice tonight.” Her smile was sweet, but tired. The ache of exhaustion from all the training we’d been doing was starting to wear on her. It was a wonder she was even able to keep upright in those treacherous Louboutin stilettos the Covenant sent up for her to wear tonight. Her body didn’t show it, but I knew she must be mighty sore.

I’d be a sight more satisfied when this was done and over with, so I could make her sore in other, better ways instead.

“Yer a hard thing to wait for, lass. And I’ve been waiting for a long time.” I moved my hand to her arse and gave it a squeeze. “No really hungry for dinner, as it turns out.”

“Really?” Joan laughed. “You said you were starving when we left the room.”

“Aye,” I agreed. “I did. But there are better things to eat here in the Inferno, ye ken.”

“Are there?” Joan arched an eyebrow. “Such as?”

I chuckled and gave her arse a pinch. Laughed even harder when she squealed and swatted me away.

“Once we’re through this dinner...ye’ll have to stick around and find out.”

AT THE TABLE, Zeb did all the talking while Mammon poured the wine.

“You know, it’s good to see the two of you getting along so well,” Zeb commented over a bite of his dessert. Devil’s food cake. A bit too on the nose for my tastes, truth be told.

“Aye, well. That was the idea, was it no?” I smiled at Joan as I fed her a bite of the whipped cream from my cranachan, topped with a red raspberry. It had the look of a nipple to it. As it disappeared between her plump lips, I couldn’t help but imagine doing something dangerously similar to Joan’s own tits once I got her to myself again.

Over dinner, we’d discussed all of the angles of the heist we were supposed to pull tonight. Not a heist at all, anymore. A gamble.

Blackjack was the name of the game. The odds almost certainly against us. The stakes: our own souls.

Perhaps I should have been worried about that, but my nerves were still eluding me for the moment.

Joan was my soul. Not some damn poker chip.

Besides—I was pretty good at cards.

After dinner was over, Joan and I would have a few hours to prepare before we faced the Four Riders. I’d have her sit on my lap again while I played cards with them, I’d already decided. But this time, I had no intentions of losing.

This time, I’d be playing to win.

“We were relieved to learn that the two of you had finally consummated your union,” Zeb admitted. “It will make everything much

easier moving forward.”

“Aye, well...good.” I didn’t have much interest in whatever Zeb was saying. I was far too busy watching Joan lick the last lingering smears of cream from her lips. “Do ye suppose there’ll be need for Joan’s powers tonight, then?”

“Oh, no. We are not expecting any trouble.” Mammon waved my question away.

“Play your cards right, and everything should go very smoothly indeed,” Zeb agreed.

I wanted to ask them why the hell they’d had us training day in and day out, in that case. If they weren’t expecting a fight, then it had been a bit silly to make Joan spend all her time mastering the powers she’d inherited from me after we’d finally made love.

But the fact of the matter was, every question I asked them was only going to prolong this event. It had gone on for too long already.

If we were quick getting out of here, I’d have plenty of time to consummate our marriage all over again before we had to go down to Avarice and finish this mission once and for all.

“Smoothly suits me just fine.” I placed my hand on Joan’s hip and cocked my head toward the door. “Are ye ready to go, lass? Sounds like we’re done here.”

“Very much so,” Joan said, breathing a sigh of relief. She washed down the whipped cream with the final sip of wine in her glass, then reached for her purse. “I’m ready if you are.”

“Surely we should finish the wine first,” Mammon said, lifting the decanter. It was nearly empty now, but as he swirled the wine around, I counted maybe two glasses left.

“Yer welcome to it,” I said. “I think we’ve had more than our fill.”

“I don’t think I need any more than what I’ve already had,” Joan agreed. “We need to keep our wits about us tonight, don’t we? And that wine...it’s pretty strong.”

“I should hope so,” Mammon said idly, reaching across the table to pour us each another glass like he hadn’t heard us say *no*. His eyes flicked up to meet mine as he emptied the decanter into my goblet. “It’s been laced with demon blood.”

Joan, who’d been in the process of taking another sip as Mammon spoke, coughed as she choked. The wine spilled from her lips back down

into the glass.

My lips curled as I studied my own goblet. Demon blood had various uses and effects, all tied to the interests and intentions of the demon it had come from. If it had been Beelzebub's blood in our glasses, we likely would have found ourselves either the most impressive liars in all the land—or suddenly unable to speak anything but the truth. Mammon's blood... maybe we would've found ourselves abruptly desperate to invest in stocks.

Neither seemed like the kind of thing that the two of them would be interested in tonight, though.

Whatever they'd dosed Joan and me with, it was strong enough to make me want to tear all of Joan's clothes off so I could ravish her here and now—whether we had the audience of my Fallen brethren or not.

Made me willing to kill them both so I could have her, if she found that more obliging, too.

It made my heart pound like it was trying to free itself from my chest cavity, made my cock so stiff that the ache of it throbbed from deep in my gut—made the scent of her so intoxicating that, if she'd been any closer, I would've been too drunk on her to contain myself.

It was turning me into a sex-crazed monster. A ravenous beast, fueled by wanting and longing and yes—by lust.

The greatest lust I'd ever known.

"It's Asmodeus' blood," I guessed. Thoughts of the child that Joan and I were prophesized to create together was rarely far from my mind, and I imagined Zeb and Mammon shared in that line of thought more than I would have liked. They'd given us something to ensure that we'd set about making that bairn whether we meant to or not. Asmodeus' blood was the most likely culprit I could imagine. The only thing strong enough to twist my will to resist my more basic urges straight out of my grasp. "A dirty trick, if so."

I kept my voice level, but my gaze was steel. Beneath the table, I clenched my fist hard enough to make my knuckles crack.

"The dirtiest. Very good, Moloch," Zeb congratulated me. "You know us better than I thought. I'm touched."

"Touched in the head, maybe." I gave Joan a firm look. "Step away from me for a bit, mo leannan. I dinnae know what this is about yet—but I dinnae want to shame ye when the effects of the blood kick in."

“Shame me?” Joan rose from her chair and backed away from me despite the confusion in her eyes. She trusted me now. Under any other circumstances, that realization would have made me smile. “What do you mean? What does Asmodeus’ blood do?”

“He’s a lust demon,” I explained. “An incubus. His blood is...an aphrodisiac, I suppose ye could say.”

“Bit of an understatement,” said Zeb. “It’s the most potent intoxicant for lust anyone has ever known. A powerful fertility drug too, come to think. It turns the minds of lovers to unbridled desire for each other and renders contraception useless. Even condoms, believe it or not. Handy little thing, really. No matter how hard you try to stop it, lust always finds a way.” Zeb turned to Mammon. “We should send Asmodeus a thank you card when this is done. We certainly owe him one.”

“So...what?” Joan’s pretty face was twisted in disgust. “You drugged us to...to make us fuck and get pregnant?”

Zeb rolled his answer around in his mouth, then shrugged. “Yes. More or less. Kind of you to put it so concisely, Joan. That’s exactly what we want.”

“The prophecy.” Now that Zeb and Mammon were laying their cards on the table, I could see more clearly what they thought they were playing at here. “You’re trying to create another half-human, half-demon child. One ye can try to claim for yerselves.”

“Bravo, Moloch.” Mammon applauded politely. “How clever of you. I do hope your child inherits that same cleverness—it will make them all the easier to utilize when they’re in our care.”

“Well, it won’t work.” Joan crossed her arms over her chest. “Even if we...if we *did*—”

“Fuck like rabbits here on the table?” Zeb supplied, gesturing to the remnants of dinner. “It’s not so much of an *if* as it is a *when*, Joan. In in a few moments here, the blood will begin to take effect in your bodies. You won’t be able to bring yourselves to leave each other’s sides. Nor will you find yourselves about to, ah...control your more basal desires, so to speak.”

“It doesn’t matter.” Joan shifted her arms down over her stomach. Already, she was protecting her womb. “I don’t care if I get pregnant.”

That made me arch a brow.

Joan and I had made a lot of progress today, but this was news. Even for me.

“Joan?” I gripped the arm of my chair tight. Already, my heart was beating a little faster. Whether that was because of Asmodeus’ blood or my own, I didn’t know. “Do ye mean that?”

“I love you.” She said it through a frown, like she was annoyed at me for making her state the obvious. “I loved you before, and I love you even more now. We’re married. You’re my husband. I’m your wife. Starting a family together...it’s the logical next step, isn’t it? Maybe it would even be...nice.”

Again, I wanted to smile at her. The idea of the two of us becoming parents...it was one I found myself enjoying as well. But there was a darkness hanging over this moment—some ugly puzzle piece of Mammon and Zeb’s plans that hadn’t yet fallen into place.

“I love ye too, Joan,” I rasped. “With all my heart. But...”

“We’re not going to give you our child,” Joan said, turning her glare back onto Zeb and Mammon. “You’re stupid if you think that we’d ever even consider it. Lock isn’t your ally, and my contract is almost fulfilled. I know how seriously creatures like you take the bonds between families now. We’re not giving you our baby, and you’re not going to be able to take it from us. So.” She let out a huff of air through her nose in a derisive laugh. “Checkmate, you stupid dicks.”

I admired her pluck. Truly, I did. One of the many things that I loved about her.

She was fearless. Even now.

But I knew Mammon and Zeb far better than she did. We’d all fallen from Heaven together. We’d lived and fought together as agents of Hell for thousands of years ever since.

If it was as simple as telling them no, they wouldn’t have spiked our drinks to begin with.

Something else was afoot.

I had a bad feeling we were about to find out exactly what.

“Well, Joan, you’ve certainly got our number,” Zeb said through a smile that turned my stomach just to look at. “It’s just...well. There’s one *small* thing that you haven’t accounted for yet.”

“Have you ever heard of the phrase *stampa fine*?” Mammon reached into his jacket and pulled out a folded piece of paper. He waved it at Joan

cheekily. “Your contract, *bella*. I believe, in your tongue, we’re dealing with what’s known as *fine print*.”

Mammon handed Zeb the contract. Zeb laid it out on the table and beckoned for Joan with a twitch of his finger. *Come and see*.

She looked to me, and I nodded.

“If he harms ye, burn him for it,” I suggested. “But otherwise...best that ye have a look at it yerself.”

I couldn’t help but watch her ass as she crossed the room. The way her hips swayed...mesmerizing. My cock stiffened at the sight. I had to blink hard and shake my head so I could keep my focus. When that failed me, I clenched my eyes shut tight.

Even then—in the darkness behind my eyelids, Joan walked naked across my mind.

Fucking demons. Fucking demon blood. Joan was irresistible to me even under normal circumstances. But now, with my head being dragged into the gutter if I so much as held her in my gaze...

Almighty help me. I certainly needed it.

My cock was hard just from being in the same room with her. If I’d stood near her—or even better, felt her skin against my skin...

The effects of the blood were still setting in, but already I was a goner. Helpless to the longing her presence stirred in me.

I wanted to bite her neck. Wanted to rip her clothes off. Wanted to pin her down on the table and use her hot, tight cunt like a sheath for my cock.

I wanted everything—and I couldn’t have any of it.

Not now that it was apparent that our desires very much had strings attached.

“It’s difficult to resist her, isn’t it?” Zeb said as Joan arrived at his side. He raised the back of his hand to her cheek and stroked the air just over it. Joan gave him a look of pure murder in return. “Even without the blood of a lust demon inside me...believe me, Moloch. I feel it too.”

“Show me the fine print,” Joan growled through her teeth. “Before I make you feel something much, much worse.”

Zeb sighed, flipped the contract over, and tapped the back of it.

Even from across the room, I could see words beginning to appear, written in a thick, dark cursive script.

Invisible ink.

“I think you will find the wording is very clear, bella—even if its placement was not,” Mammon commented. “Simple...yet incredibly binding.”

“The promisee agrees that any child she conceives with an agent of Hell before the terms of the agreement are completed...” Joan blinked and swallowed hard. Her eyes shifted up to meet mine. “Will become the property of the Covenant.”

“All parental rights terminated immediately upon the child’s birth,” Zeb added, reading the rest of the clause over Joan’s shoulder. “The Covenant can’t have any rogue half-demon children running around out of their control, now can they? Think of what terrible things that child might do if they grew up in the wrong hands.”

“You *are* the Covenant,” Joan snapped at him. “You both are. Any child raised by you *would* grow up in the wrong hands.”

“Oh, we’re part of it, certainly,” Zeb admitted. “But of course, we’re not working alone. What’s the saying...it takes a village?”

“I think,” I said, rising slowly. “It would be in your best interests if ye voided that contract here and now.”

“Absolutely not.” Zeb gave a bark of a laugh. “Why the fuck would we want to do that?”

“Because I’ll kill ye,” I said, raising my hand toward Moloch. Flames flickered at my fingertips, threatening to burst into an inferno at the slightest provocation. “First one, then the other. I willnae be nice about it, neither. I’ll make it hurt.”

Mammon tutted at me patronizingly. “I would not do that if I were you, Moloch.”

“And why should I no, ye scheming wee fuck?”

“Joan is a member of the Covenant until her contract is fulfilled,” Zeb explained. He stroked his hand down the back of her head, smoothing down her hair in a way that made my blood boil. “If you attack either of us, you’ll bring her harm as well.”

“More fine print,” Mammon said, chipper. “Mi dispiace, Moloch, but for obvious reasons, it did occur to us that you would not be pleased with this arrangement. I would lower your hand, if I were you. Someone—” He grinned at Joan. “—might get hurt.”

“Oh, someone will get hurt, all right.” Joan spun around and stuck her hand in front of Zeb’s face, shooting fire from her fingertips at a point-

blank range. “You.”

Zeb didn’t even flinch.

He wound his fingers around her wrist as the flames sputtered out into smoke.

Fuck. That wasn’t a good sign at all.

“Stupid girl. You can’t use the powers of Hell against me.” Zeb turned hand over in his and brought her fingers down to another line that had formed in the invisible ink. “See there? It says quite clearly—*the promisee will not use any abilities acquired during the fulfillment of the contract to bring members of the Covenant harm.*”

Joan stared down at the line for a moment, then nodded in acceptance. The powers she’d gained from our union were useless to her now—and if I intervened, it would only harm Joan, too.

“Guess we’ll have to do this the old-fashioned way, then.”

She wheeled round and brought her hand up to his face hard. With the heel of her palm, she caught the underside of his nose and slammed it up into his skull. Zeb hissed in pain and reeled back, releasing her.

If he’d been a human, I knew, that blow very well might have killed him.

We might have underestimated the secret terms in Joan’s contract, but the Covenant had made a grave mistake in underestimating Joan.

“Little bitch,” Zeb swore as his black blood flowed from his crooked nose. Already, his face was swelling. “I’ll make you pay for that.”

“Will you?” Joan crossed the room and placed herself in my arms. My body roared with desire at her closeness, but for the time being—no. I knew I had to hold myself back. “Because the way I see it, you’ve got about six hours of my service left in that contract before Lock and I are both free to kick your sorry ass—and hurting me now will almost certainly spoil the mood if you think you’re getting a child out of the deal as well.”

I wanted to smile. That was my Joan. My wife. Clever beyond measure.

Vicious, too.

“There is no need for anyone else to be hurt tonight,” Mammon said with a surprising amount of diplomacy. I knew it for what it was, of course: he was a coward. He didn’t want Joan to get it in her head that she might enjoy breaking his nose as well. “Our hands are all equally tied here, no? Best if we wrap things up, I think. Soon, we will have everything

we want—and the two of you will hand it to us.” He raised an eyebrow suggestively. “As soon as you give in to your more basic desires, the child will be conceived—and it will be ours. Once the full effects of Asmodeus’ blood kick in, I think you will find it difficult to say no.”

“This was never about the Riders, was it?” I sent daggers toward them both through my glare. “Ye never wanted any heist, truly. Only a reason to bring Joan and me together so ye could claim a child that was never yours to take.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Zeb scoffed. “You have no idea what machinations are in play here. Why should we settle for *just* the child or *just* the souls of the Riders when we could have both? We’ll meet you in Avarice later to complete the terms of our contract with Joan.” He laughed. “By that time, I imagine you’ll have triggered the terms of the fine print, as well.”

“You’re sociopaths,” Joan spat, clinging to my chest. Her fingers curled against my muscles, stirring the flames of lust that mingled with all the rage in my heart.

“How sweet of you to notice.” Mammon chuckled. “But we are fallen angels, bella. Creatures of Hell. I do not see why you are so surprised.”

“I’ll kill ye for this someday,” I promised them. “I’ll bring ye both to yer ends—and I promise ye this. It will no be quick, and it will no be pretty, either.”

“Ah, well...” Mammon shrugged. “That is not the first time I have received such a threat, my friend. I am sure it will not be the last, either.”

“We’ll leave you two to discuss things now,” Zeb said with a bastard’s knowing smile as he turned to the door. “I’m sure this is a conversation you’d prefer to have alone.”

“Yes. *Discuss*,” said Mammon. He laughed, following Zeb out. “But somehow, I imagine there will not be much talking going on.”

“Lock...what are we going to do?” Joan asked once they were gone.

I held her body tight to mine. My arms didn’t want to give her up. My cock pressed stiff against the fabric of my trousers, desperate to be free of them. Once it finally was, taking her would be simple as drawing breath.

I could have her, I knew. It didn’t matter how. Didn’t matter if she fought me—she was strong, but I was stronger.

Didn’t matter if I bent her over the table with her dress pushed up around her waist, or if I picked her up and impaled her on my cock while I

fucked her up against the wall.

I could have her, take her, force myself on her and make her mine. She loved me. She wanted me, too. I could feel it in the way she pressed her small body against my larger one. She arched her back to shove her hips forward and let out a low, sudden moan that nearly ripped my soul from my chest and left me unable to control myself at all.

She might even like it if I claimed her the way I wanted to in that moment. Rough and snarling and vicious. Violently and entirely hers.

But no.

We couldn't. We *wouldn't*.

I needed her, but I didn't dare.

Slowly, I forced myself to release her. When she reached for me, I made myself push her away.

"I've got a plan," I admitted. I clenched my jaw and kept my eyes on the floor as I put space between her body and mine. Even looking at her felt dangerous now. With Asmodeus' blood coursing through my body, even breathing in her scent from across the room was enough to drive me half-mad with lust. "But it's no one yer gonna like."

"Lock..."

She breathed my name and I couldn't help myself. I glanced up at her.

My heart spasmed in my chest as soon as I had her in my sights.

Her dark eyes were wide, rimmed with even darker lashes. The gentle panting of her breath made her breasts heave. They strained against the top of her dress with every inhale.

"Christ, Joanie." I tore myself away from her and turned to the wall. My fist crashed against it hard enough to crumble the stone. "I need ye. Need ye something fierce. Not bein' able to take ye... I'll die if I don't."

"I know," she whispered. "I feel it. I need you too. That's why...we have to, don't we? Whatever plan you have...we don't have a choice but to try it. Whether we like it or not."

"Aye. Whether we like it or not." I braced myself against the wall. My body was tearing itself apart, every muscle threatening to unfurl and fray at its seams. "But when we're done—I'm going to have ye, Joan. Yer mouth and yer cunt and yer tits—everything. All of it. Don't think that I'll be denied for long."

"I don't want to deny you," she said from behind me. Her voice trembled as she spoke. "I don't want to deny you anything at all."

“Good. I’ll hold ye to that.” I nodded and pulled myself together. It felt like wrapping a too-short chain round the entire and bringing its ends together without a single inch of give.

But any child conceived of our coupling right now would belong to Hell. The thought of stirring life in Joan’s womb, watching her belly swell and knowing that my heir was within her, only to have the bairn torn away from us the moment it was born...

It was a thing worth doing the unthinkable to prevent.

The contract said that any child created between an agent of the Covenant and a being of Hell would become the property of the Covenant. Joan couldn’t fulfill her contract until later tonight, and I knew that neither of us would be able to hold on for that long.

But there was another way. A simple one.

I’d been born in Heaven. Before I’d lost my wings and fallen, I’d been an angel.

I would just have to make sure that by the time I finally lost control of my ability to deny the thing my body wanted most, I wasn’t a creature of Hell at all anymore.

LOCK

“This is your plan?” Joan gestured to the sign of the club as we stood outside it. Green and yellow neon were shaped into a glowing palm tree next to a luminescent pink script that read *Paradise*. “A strip club?”

“Joanie...dinnae say the word *strip* to me right now, if ye can help it.” My jaw clenched as a flood of lewd images filled my mind. Joan walking towards me wearing one of my shirts, slowly unbuttoning it to reveal the swells of her breasts in a black lace bra. Joan, straddling my lap and gyrating her hips against me to the beat of a filthy rock song. Joan, twirling around and around on a silver pole wearing nothing at all— “I dinnae think my heart can handle it.”

Or my cock, for that matter. Fuck, I wanted her. Wanted to throw her down right here in the parking lot, push that tight little skirt of hers up to her ribs and thrust my cock deep inside her until I felt her come around me, hard and quick.

“What are we doing here, then?” She licked her lips and reached out for me. Her fingertips brushed against my ribs like she was imagining ripping all of my clothes off as well. “I don’t see how walking into a...a *dancing* club is going to help matters at all right now. Unless...”

Her eyes met mine, gently pleading.

I knew what she was saying.

Unless you’ve changed your mind.

I drew in a breath, but that only made things worse. I could smell her cunt from here—sweet and wet and begging to be bred.

“Stop that, lass.” I grabbed her hand and forced myself to push it away. “I’m barely hangin’ on as is. We’re here to meet someone.”

“Who?” Joan asked. “I don’t think a three-way will really help matters either...”

I snorted. That, at least, inspired nothing in me.

I didn’t want Joan and some other woman. I wanted Joan, naked and tied to my bed with her legs spread. Simple as that.

“Ye willnae like it,” I admitted. I took a step forward and cupped my hands around my mouth, raising my voice to a holler. “Gabriel, ya wee shite! It’s Moloch! Get the fuck out here! I wanna talk to ye!”

“*Gabriel?*” Joan hissed, glaring up at me incredulously.

“Like I said, lass.” I shrugged. “Ye weren’t gonna like it.”

A few long moments passed, but finally, the door to Paradise opened and Gabriel slipped out of it. His face still looked battered from our last meeting. His nose was swollen and crooked, and he had dark purple bruises tinged with green under both his eyes.

“You’ve got some nerve, coming here.” Gabriel’s gaze wandered to Joan and he scoffed. “Surprised you’re even still alive.”

“Well, no thanks to you, Gabby.” I moved forward with my hand outstretched, ready for a shake. “Glad yer here, though. I wanna make a deal.”

Gabriel glanced down at my hand with a sneer. “Forgive me, but I seem to recall the last deal that Heaven cut with Hell, Moloch.” He gestured to Joan. “And yet, here’s your human bride. I don’t think your kind and mine are meant to play nice.”

“Maybe it’s time we started workin’ for the same side again, then,” I offered. “This is all about keepin’ the world in balance, aye? Preventin’ a, ah...another human-demon, er. Pregnancy.”

I swallowed hard as I said that word: *pregnancy*. Now, my mind was full of a new set of images: Joan with a round belly and swollen tits. Bending her over a table and pinching her nipple between my fingers until her milk dripped down into my coffee in the mornings. Staring up at her over the rise of her stomach, then diving between her thighs to lap at her fertile cunt.

Fuck. Preventing Joan from getting pregnant was the last thing on my list of desires right now.

If anything, what I wanted to do was find a nice alleyway to pin her up against the wall of so I could pump my seed into her cunt until she gave me twins.

“Lock...” Joan said, her voice full of concern. I bit my lip and held my hand up to her, a plea for her to stay quiet. Just for a moment.

Even the sound of my name on her lips was nearly too much for me to handle right now.

Gabriel stared at us for a moment, then laughed. “Did you bring her here so I could kill her properly this time? It’s a bold move, Moloch, but if you’ve finally come to your senses—”

“Keep talkin’ like that and I’ll cave yer fuckin’ head in, Gabs.” I let a huff of hot air out through my nostrils. “No. What I came here for was a gamble. You an’ me.”

“A gamble for *what*, exactly?”

“Wings,” I said. “Toss ye for ‘em. I win, I take yours. You win, I’ll let ye cut mine out right here and now.”

“If I cut off your wings, you’ll become an angel again,” Gabriel said slowly. He was looking at me like I’d just told him the Earth was the flat head of a push-pin made for angels to dance disco on. “Not to mention... what in Hell’s name would you want *my* wings for?”

“Ach...things.” I shrugged. “Stuff. Evil plans, most like. Demon shite. Ye know how it goes. But it’s a fair deal, Gabby. Good odds. Best take it before I change my mind.”

Gabriel knitted his brows together. “I have no interest in becoming infernal.”

“Well, best win, then. If ye do, I cannae go makin’ half-demonic bairns with my wife, now can I? Apocalypse averted, and a fallen angel returned to the flock on top of it. Balance restored. Ye’ll be the talk of Heaven. Probably earn yerself another halo as a reward.”

It was the same thing they’d wanted from Lucifer: to restore him to Heaven’s holy embrace. And now that we knew it wasn’t just demons and humans shacking up together that was throwing things off balance, but rather, the conception of their children...

I’d be free to fuck my wife as I pleased. No condoms. No pulling out. Just my hard, hot cock plunging deep into Joan’s sweet cunt.

Even without Asmodeus' horny blood coursing around inside me, I couldn't think of anything I wanted more.

"Lock," Joan hissed again. "If you lose...the prophecy was pretty clear that any child of ours would have to be half-demon, half-human. And if you're an angel again..."

"I ken, Joanie," I said with a ragged sigh. It made my chest ache just about as bad as my balls were to think of it—but if we didn't do this now, I didn't know for how much longer my body could be denied the pleasures of hers. "I don't expect that we'll be havin' any bairns at all after this. But there's no other way. Ye understand that, don't ye?"

"I..." Joan bit her lip at she stared up at me. Her dark eyes glistened mournfully. Then, she turned away. "Yes. I understand. I don't like it...but you're right."

"This is some kind of trick, isn't it?" Gabriel still didn't look sold on the idea. Suspicious bastard. "You're offering me everything I might want, Moloch—but I still don't see what you have to gain."

"No? I'm a King of Hell now, Gabs. Imagine the kind of clout I'd have below for bringin' an angel into our ranks." I reached into my pocket and pulled out a coin, letting him see the face on it. A George Washington in profile. "C'mon. Yer wings for mine. I'll flip ye for it. Fifty-fifty odds."

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Joan open her mouth...then close it again. I knew what she was probably ready to point out.

If I actually won this bet, we'd have a pissed off fallen angel on our hands and a pair of wings we had no real use for.

But maybe she'd recalled the earlier lessons on gambling I'd given to her.

Sometimes, it was better to play to lose.

"All right," Gabriel finally said in agreement. He held out his hand, and I shook it. "I'm game. The risk is worth it if I win."

"Thought ye might say that. Call it in the air, aye?" I tossed the coin high and held my breath as it glimmered in the neon light.

Now, I was banking on what I knew of Gabriel to make this work. I knew he didn't trust me, or else I wouldn't have framed this stupid plan as a bet to begin with. I knew he was observant, too, even with his blackened eyes. He'd seen one side of the coin already. If he thought this was a trick—and knowing him, he'd think everything I was pulling right now was—he'd bet on what he assumed was a certainty.

“Heads,” he said as the coin tumbled back down into my palm.

I let out my breath nice and slow as I slapped the coin onto the back of my free hand. Carefully, I uncovered it so we could all see what it had landed on.

“Damn,” I deadpanned as George Washington’s face made a reappearance. “Heads it is.”

Gabriel blinked down at the coin, then let out a laugh of surprise.

“Well then. I suppose it’s my lucky day.” His eyes met mine. “Come inside, then. You’ll burn, of course, but not for long. Meanwhile...I’ll get my knife.”

As Gabriel turned back toward the door to Paradise, I could practically see him clicking his heels together with glee in my mind’s eye. He must’ve been ecstatic.

Good.

In an awful kind of way, so was I.

“Lock...are you sure about this?” Joan moved to my side and reached up to press her hand to my chest. She only stopped herself in the nick of time.

I was grateful for that.

If she’d touched me in that moment, I would have had her bent over before she drew another breath.

“Aye,” I rasped. My body was tense, but in my heart, I’d never been so relieved in all my life. “Gabriel will lop off my wings. I’ll spring nice, big new ones in their place. And then...” I panted slightly at the very thought of what would come next. “I’m takin’ ye into a room there in Paradise and fuckin’ the hell out of ye. And not a moment too soon.” I turned to her with a grin. “After all—ye’ll be an angel’s wife.”

“I...I will be, won’t I?” She clasped her hands together like it was the only thing keeping her from touching me in that moment. “But...what exactly was the plan if you’d won?”

I let out a bark of a laugh and carefully handed her the coin I’d tossed.

“I wasnae ever gonna win,” I explained, watching her turn the coin over. On one side, George Washington’s head...and on the other, George Washington’s head again. “Game was rigged. It’s a trick coin.”

“You’re...” Joan stared at the coin in wonder, flipping it over again and again between her fingers. “Fuck. You’re incredible, you know that?”

“I thought ye might say that.” I winked at her. “Now—get that pert little arse of yours inside so the angels can cut my wings off. If we wait any longer, I’ll have ye bred before Gabby manages to find his knife.”

“I might like that,” Joan admitted, blushing and looking away. “I mean...I know that we can’t—that we shouldn’t—but—”

“I feel it too, lass,” I said gently. My cock was going to be furious with me as soon as it realized. My balls, even more so. Already, my heart was crushing in on itself. I’d never be a father now. I’d never be able to stir life in Joan’s womb in the way my body was burning to do—but for the sake of the world we both loved, it was worth it. It had to be. “It’ll hurt less when I’ve got ye in a nice, soft bed with yer clit in my mouth, I reckon. Only way now.”

“You really think we won’t be able to...” Joan bit her lip and looked away. “You know.”

“The prophecy says any bairn of ours will be a half-hellion that helps usher in the end of the world,” I said with a laugh that dragged its way through my throat like a razor blade. “So...no. I dinnae think... It’s no in the cards for us, lass.” I turned her face up toward mine. “But that doesnae mean that I love ye any less. Ye must ken that, at least.”

“I love you too. It’s just...you would’ve made a good dad,” Joan whispered as we followed Gabriel toward the door of paradise. “I know you would’ve. I’m sorry.”

“Aye, and ye would’ve been a good mother,” I agreed. “But there’s nothin’ to be sorry for. Think of it this way—we can always adopt.”

She laughed, then covered her mouth like the sound had surprised her. “I really do love you, Lock. You always know just what to say.”

“Yeah?” I beamed down at her. It took every bit of restraint I possessed not to fuck her up against Paradise’s door for that pretty laugh of hers alone—but I’d manage. At least, for a little while longer. “I love ye too, lass. Somethin’ fierce. Would’ve loved to breed ye too, of course... so let’s get this over with before I change my mind.”

JOAN

Gabriel hadn't been kind about it. The cuts he'd made into Lock's shoulders, moving the tip of his knife like he was cutting the rotten parts of the apple, had gone deep.

But as I helped Lock into the room that had been prepared for us within Paradise, I knew that we were safe now. Not forever, but for the moment.

Lock's black demon's blood had gone tacky on his back. Now, the blood that flowed from his wounds was pearly and white.

Emerging from those wounds were broad, white wings.

He kept one wing curled around me as we slumped together through the door. The weight of his body against my shoulder was a heavy one to bear, but I could tell he was doing his best to keep his feet.

"Let's get you on the bed." I strained my muscles, guiding him to the king-sized mattress in the center of the room. All around it, pink and blue neon lights from the ceiling reflected off the white silk sheets. "How do you feel?"

"Like hell," Lock rasped. He clasped my hand as he lowered himself down onto the pillows. When his body put pressure on the wings, he hissed with pain. "Like fuckin' hell."

"Maybe you shouldn't lie on your back," I suggested, knitting my brow together with concern. "Let me help you roll over on your stomach. It'll feel better."

“Nah.” He panted as his eyes went in and out of focus. “It’s fine. I’m fine.”

“Lock...” *Big, stubborn idiot!* “You’re not fine.”

“Ach. I’m all right.”

“You’re not all right!” That much was clear. His skin was pale and his brow was beaded with sweat. When I placed my hand against his forehead, I didn’t find any of his normal heat. His skin was clammy and cold.

“I’ll manage,” he grunted.

I supposed that was true. He’d have to.

But as I let my eyes wander up and down his body, I wondered if maybe there wasn’t a way I could help him manage a little easier.

On the night of our wedding, Lock had saved my life.

And while I didn’t think his life was exactly in danger at the moment...

I knew there was at least one way I could help soothe his pain.

I reached for his belt and began to unbuckle it.

“Lass?” Lock groaned softly as he struggled to look down at me. “What are ye doin’?”

“Making you feel better.” My fingers worked at the button of his pants, then moved to the zipper. Before I could pull it down all the way, Lock stopped me.

“Ye dinnae need to, lass,” he mumbled. “I’ll no have ye performin’ pity sex on me.”

“Who said it’s pity sex?” I bit my lip as a rush of unwanted emotion swelled up in my throat. It was pointless for either of us to indulge in pity right now. Even though every cell of my body was desperate to scream about how unfair this all was. “I have to fulfill the contract to free myself from it, Lock. Maybe...maybe I just want to enjoy you one last time.”

“Joan...” He turned my hand over in his and laced his fingers into the spaces between mine. “Ye cannae talk like that. I won’t stand it.”

“Yeah?” I moved over him to straddle his hips. With my free hand, I tugged his zipper down. My fingers dipped beneath the waistband of his boxers. I gripped his cock firmly, squeezed it tight and drew it out to position it at the entrance of my cunt. “And what are you going to do about it?”

“Fuck.” Lock’s lips curled back, baring his teeth. “Yer honey, lass. It’s drippin’ down on me already.”

“Good.” I teased his tip with my folds, clenching so I could give it kisses with my lower set of lips. “That will make what comes next so much easier, then.”

I impaled myself on him. Not inch by inch this time, but the entire length of him. I wouldn’t settle for anything less. I cried out as I felt him bottom out inside me, but even that wasn’t enough.

I needed all of him. If it hurt—fine. He was already hurting. The least I could do was join in him that pain.

The sounds of our sex were an animalistic symphony. Cries and hisses, purrs and growls. I was wrapped around him and he was inside me—finally. Perfectly. No condom. Nothing between us but the heat of lust and the warmth of love.

“Christ.” Lock’s lips were pulled back, baring his teeth. The pain in his eyes was being replaced by a new look—one of intensely present need. “Yer cunt is so hot for me...so fuckin’ tight...”

I could feel him straining against himself, like there was a ferocious monster inside him that he was trying desperately to keep in.

I didn’t want that.

I wanted him. All of him. Not tamed or restrained, but entirely uncaged.

When I married him, I’d married a beast of Hell.

Even if Lock was an angel now, I knew that somewhere within him, that beast still lived.

“I’m yours,” I growled back at him, rocking back onto the balls of my feet so I could pump his shaft even harder. Even faster. “I’m hot for you because I was made for you. If I’m too tight...stretch me out. Make yourself fit.”

“Ye ken what yer askin’ for?” His eyes met mine, need shifting to pleading. A dark glint flickered into his greens, turning need to promise.

Lock knew me. He knew my body better than anyone else ever had.

All I had to do was say yes.

“I know.” I dug my nails into his shoulders, dropping down to press my breasts firmly against his chest. His firm heat sank deep into me—but not deep enough. Not yet. “Can I have it?”

“Joan...” Lock panted. “Chrissakes, woman. Keep that up and I’m gonna come...”

“Then give it to me,” I begged, clinging to him as I stroked his cock with my cunt. My nails bit into his shoulders. Every breath that left my lips was a whimper of need. “Please. Come inside me. It’s all I want.”

“Take it then, Joan.” Lock rolled us over suddenly, reclaiming control. He slammed his cock deep into me and let out a growl through his teeth. His fingers dug into my hips as his cum exploded from his tip, coating my channel completely. I could feel him clench, swell and release every burst of it. “Take my seed. Its yers. It’s all fuckin’ yers.”

I came with him then in a golden, glowing arc of pure pleasure.

He was right.

It *was* mine.

Lock gasped as I continued to clench around him even when he was spent. The panging echoes of my orgasm massaged his shaft, squeezing out every last drop of his cum.

“Fuck,” Lock swore, kissing my hair. “I love ye, Joan.”

“I love you too, Lock,” I whispered, nuzzling his cheek with the tip of my nose. “Feel better?”

Lock let out a sigh of relief as he carefully rolled off of me. “Aye. Ye do have a way of makin’ things hurt less, Joan. Always have.”

I moved my body as close to his as I could and pressed a kiss to his temple. “Always will.”

In the wake of our lovemaking, Lock did appear to be in better health. He was no longer quite so tense, and the color was coming back in his cheeks as well.

But there was still a different hurt left unspoken between us. One that we shared.

We’d never be parents. It sucked, but it was fine. Like Lock had said. We’d find a way later, when the birth of any child we had together wouldn’t help bring the world to an end. Or we’d adopt. I’d grown up in the foster care system. It would be kind of nice, to help pull a child out of it.

Neither of us liked to dwell on what we couldn’t change. It almost wasn’t worth discussing.

When fate was against us, we made our own fate.

“So.” I propped myself up on my elbow so I could look down at him. We didn’t have much longer now. Soon, the Four Riders would take their places at the tables of Avarice.

Soon, I'd need to fulfill our mission.

But now, I'd have to do it alone.

"So," Lock echoed. He stared back at me with a hunger—not for sex anymore, but for something far more tender.

If things went wrong tonight, we both knew this might be the last chance either of us had to stare into each other's eyes again.

"The plan hasn't changed all that much, you know." I ran my fingers through his hair, creating furrows in the sweat-soaked ruddy brown like I was plowing a field. "I'll play in your place tonight. I'll win. I'll fight my way out if I have to—and I'll meet you back here when I'm done."

"Aye," Lock agreed. "I dinnae like it, but...yer right. The only way out of this is through." He took my hand in his and pressed his fingers into the spaces between mine. "Reckon I'll go to Greenriver while yer at work. I made ye a promise that's gone unfulfilled for far too long. I'll be useless in getting ye out of yer contract now—I'd burn to ash in Hell long before I could do anything to help ye there—but I can heal Ava's mother. I think I know the way."

"Thank you, Lock. That means a lot."

"It's no much. Next to nothing." He sighed. "But maybe it'll give ye peace of mind. Somethin' for me to busy myself with, if nothing else."

Lock's eyes were focused on our hands, clasped together tight. His was so large and rough. Mine, so small and dainty by comparison.

"I cannae go with ye to Avarice, mo leannan. I wish I could. But if ye find trouble there—and I suspect ye might—I can make sure I'm able to find my way back to ye. No matter where ye are."

I clasped his hand tighter. "How?"

"There's more uses for blood than drugging unsuspecting newlyweds." He gave my hand a squeeze in return, then untangled our fingers and brought the heel of his palm to his mouth.

Lock winced as he bit into his hand, hard enough to break the skin. When he pulled it away, his blood glimmered like liquid pearl on his lower lip. Angel's blood.

"Give me yer hand, lass. Your turn now."

"I gave you my hand weeks ago, Lock." I smiled at him gently, just for a moment, as I twisted my wedding band around my ring finger. It had never felt heavy or awkward there. Always, even before he'd shown me

the history of our love, it had always felt right. “If you’re planning to bite me, I think I’d prefer your teeth on my neck instead.”

“Minx,” Lock whispered, brushing my hair behind my ear. “Will ye do it yerself, then? I want my blood within ye. I cannae give ye a bairn anymore, but if ye lose tonight, I need the connection between us to be as strong as we can make it. If yer soul is lost...I need a way to track ye down so I can bring ye back. And historically speakin’, yer a difficult woman to find.”

“I’m not going to lose.” I didn’t want to talk about that possibility. It was unthinkable now. There was too much at stake. “But yes, Lock. I’ve had you inside me in every other way now. Might as well.”

I sank my teeth into the heel of my palm, just like Lock had done. I whimpered as my teeth broke through my skin. The iron of my blood filled my mouth, hot and tangy. Bitter and sweet.

When I lowered my hand again, Lock pressed our bite marks together. It should have hurt more, but somehow, it didn’t.

Being close to Lock never hurt at all.

“Win for me, Joan,” he whispered to me as my blood mixed with his.

“I will,” I promised him. There was no other option. Either I’d win tonight, or all was lost. “Kiss me, Lock? For good luck.”

“Aye,” he said with a nod. “For luck.”

But as Lock’s hand curled around the back of my neck, drawing my lips to his, I knew luck wasn’t the real reason behind our kiss.

People like Lock and I made our own luck.

We were kissing because we wanted to. Because in the moment, it was the only thing that felt right in the entire world.

We were kissing because we were made for each other. Fated across centuries. Forged from the same stars.

And if fate decided to frown upon us tonight...

We were kissing to say goodbye.

Not forever, though. I didn’t believe in that kind of forever anymore. Even if all was lost, someday, somehow, Lock would find me again. Either in this life, or in another. Even if he had to tear the universe apart at its seams to do it.

We kissed goodbye—goodbye for now.

JOAN

My heart ached for Lock as I descended to the Inferno's fourth floor. The small bite mark I'd left beneath my thumb ached even more.

I missed him. I wished he could be with me tonight. But I knew what an incredible sacrifice he'd made to thwart the Covenant's plans for us. For our child, who likely would never be born now.

If we played our cards right, we'd be able to destroy everything that the Covenant was working toward on two fronts tonight. No half-demon baby to complete their prophecy. No souls for them to claim, either.

Even if one part of our plan failed, the other would serve as an excellent back-up.

Either the prophecy would never be completed, and we'd be able to avoid the apocalypse entirely...

Or, barring that, I'd escape the Inferno tonight with the souls of the Four Riders in my purse.

No matter what, we'd make it out of this okay.

If we couldn't prevent the war that might end the world, we'd at least be able to win it.

For the time being, that was good enough.

I met Zeb and Mammon in the entrance of Avarice. Zeb's nose was still very much broken, I was happy to see.

"Hello, Zeb," I greeted him with a smile. "Looks like you've had some work done. How's your sense of smell?"

“Lacking at the moment,” he admitted with a slight sneer. “How kind of you to ask.”

There was no sign of Leviathan—not yet. For the moment, it seemed like Zeb and Mammon would be briefing me on the last facets of this mission alone.

They watched me with keen eyes as I collected my chips.

“Where’s your plus-one?” Zeb asked once my bucket was full. “I recall the plan was for both of you to be here tonight.”

“Plans change.” I met his black eyes unflinchingly with my own. “I’m the one under contract here. I’m the one who’s going to complete it. Is that a problem for you?”

Mammon and Zeb exchanged a glance.

“Of course not.” Mammon waved the notion away. “You’re here now. That’s what matters.”

“As promised,” said Zeb, gesturing to a poker table in the center of the room. Four men in helmets sat at it, engrossed in a game of blackjack. “Meet the Four Riders of the Apocalypse.”

“Which is which?” I asked. Each of the riders wore a different-colored helmet. Otherwise, they were all dressed in matching leather jackets with silver crosses and flames stitched onto the backs.

“The First wears white,” Zeb explained. “His name is Conquest. When the end of days arrives, he’ll conquer the world in the name of whoever owns his soul.”

I gritted my teeth. The idea of Zeb and Mammon owning a servant who would claim my entire world in their names was far from a pleasant one.

But I wasn’t about to let Zeb get to me. Not tonight.

It was just another reminder of exactly why I needed to win.

“What about the Second?” I asked. “Which one is he?”

“In the red, stellina,” Mammon said. “His name is War. When the great battle between Heaven and Hell breaks out on Earth, he’ll fight on our side. If you win, of course—and we *do* need you to win.”

“The Third wears the black helmet,” Zeb added.

“Which would make him...what? Pestilence? Famine, maybe?” I guessed. It was hard to recall my scriptures. It had been a long time since I’d read Revelations. But my guesses both sounded like they had a chance of being right.

Zeb chuckled. "No. The Third is named Desire. When he rides, he'll fill the hearts of all he passes with a longing that can't be denied. Whatever humans survive the end of days will be left desperate for the things they yearn for the most. With their wanting, we'll enslave them."

"Of course you will." The mere thought of my friends becoming slaves to these demons made my stomach churn. That wasn't going to happen. I couldn't let it. I wouldn't. "Which leaves..."

"The Fourth," Zeb said. "In the dark green helmet."

"Death." I knew that one for sure. "And what will you do with his soul?"

They didn't have to respond for me to know that whatever their plans for Death were, it wouldn't be anything good.

"Become eternal," Mammon answered, like it was something so simple. "When the Earth is conquered, its people are enthralled and the great war is won, whoever controls Death will become more than immortal."

"He'll become a god," Zeb explained. "A being powerful enough to take down the Almighty himself."

"And what about my soul?" I asked, more out of morbid curiosity than anything. "If someone else wins that, what will happen to me?"

Zeb chuckled darkly and shook his head. "You'd be under their control forever, I suppose. Whatever command they gave you, you'd be helpless to resist. Your only choice would be to obey."

"Which is why it would be a shame if you lose tonight, tesoro," Mammon said with a sigh. "Such beauty in the hands of such rough men... it is a pity that your husband could not gamble in your place."

"I don't need Lock to gamble for me," I assured him. "And I'm not planning on losing, either."

Mammon gave me a broad smile. "Ah. How I love a woman with conviction. We truly made the perfect choice when we found you."

"Are you ready?" Zeb asked.

I shrugged. "Does it matter?"

He smiled. "No, I suppose it really doesn't."

Beelzebub took my hand and raised it to his lips. I let him. His kisses meant nothing to me, and he knew better to get handsy with me now.

"Good luck, gorgeous," he said as he drew away. "You're going to need it."

“We wish you the best, bella.” Mammon reached for my hand to give it a kiss as well, but I had no intention of gambling with the Riders with Mammon’s slobber all over my knuckles.

I gave him a look of warning. One that, thankfully, he heeded.

Zeb and Mammon took their leave, and just like that, I was on my own.

At least, for now.

I bit my lip, nodded, then made my way over to the Riders’ table.

It was time.

“Hello, boys. Mind if I join?” I asked, slipping into one of the two empty seats remaining at the table.

For a long moment, none of the Riders moved. Even when they finally did, looking to each other in turn, none of them spoke.

The temptation to say something more was strong, but as I mulled it over, I knew it didn’t feel right.

It seemed like the Riders were all communicating in some silent way, in a language all their own.

After what felt like a small eternity, they all nodded in unison.

They were willing, and I was ready.

The Fourth dealt me in.

I checked my hand. The ace of hearts and the two of clubs. It wasn’t a great start to the game, but I had plenty of chips to work with and, just like Lock had done on that first night I’d watched him play, I knew I didn’t need to win. Not right away.

For the time being, all I needed to do was observe.

It only took a few rounds for me to unpack each of the men I was gambling against. Lock had taught me well.

The First, Conquest, was aggressive. He bet high when he had a good hand, and even higher when he had a bad one.

He didn’t play to win. He played to *dominate*. Win or lose.

The Second, War, operated like clockwork. On the surface, he looked like he was playing in the same style as Conquest, but every hand he ended with was well-within the winning range. Not once did he take a hit too many.

He was a strategist, and he played the long game. I knew he’d only take an extra card if it was well worth the risk.

The Third seemed to have some luck to his name. He played his best hands when his chips were down. With his very soul on the line, I knew

he'd be desperate to win now.

Gambling with Desire was going to be a dangerous game indeed.

It was only the Fourth who was a mystery now. He had no tells. No patterns—at least, none that I could track.

Death, as it turned out, was unpredictable.

I knew I'd have to beat him fair and square, entirely based on the luck of the draw.

Once we'd all had a chance to play dealer, I felt the air around me shift. None of the Riders had spoken the entire time we'd been playing, but they must have felt it too.

It was time.

This round, we'd be playing for more than just chips.

We'd be playing for souls, and we'd be playing for keeps.

Each of the Riders unzipped their leather jackets. Beneath, they each wore t-shirts over their thick muscles. One by one, they placed their fingers to the centers of their chests.

When they pulled their hands away, they each held a white poker chip.

It was exactly the thing that Lock had once warned me against. If he'd been here, I knew that it was his soul he would have put on the line.

Now, in his absence, I'd have to bet my own.

My chest flushed warm as I reached toward it. I closed my eyes, unsure of what I was even supposed to be looking for.

The Riders had all made this look easy. But they'd obviously done this before. I hadn't.

I was just going to have to trust my instincts.

They hadn't led me astray yet.

As I pressed my fingers harder against my chest, my fingers found something hot pressing back.

Slowly, I pulled out a chip of my own chest. It was pretty and immaculately white. Written in shiny gold script on either side of it was my name: *Joan Bouchard*.

I took a deep breath and placed it on the poker table with all the others. Was I scared? Probably a little.

But if this was what it took to keep the world I lived in and the people I loved safe, then fear didn't matter.

Right now, Lock was in Greenriver holding up his end of our plan.

It was time for me to do my part as well.

“All right.” I nodded and reached for the deck. “Let’s go.”

“Room for one more?”

I turned to find an older man standing behind me. He wore a sharp, dark green suit. His dark hair was streaked with silver. So was his goatee.

His eyes were intensely blue.

Just like Lock had predicted—our greatest enemy had finally shown his stupid face.

“Leviathan.” I greeted him the way I imagined Lock would have. Leviathan didn’t deserve my niceties—and I didn’t need him to know how happy I was that he was here, either. Instead, I gestured to the seat across from me, which had been left empty. “Please. Sit down.”

“Are you sure?” His eyes trailed up and down my body, pausing at my lap. *Horny prick*. His gaze only left me to glance at the white chips on the table. The Souls of the Four Riders...and my own. “It seems the stakes are a little higher than I’m used to.”

“Surely a man like yourself isn’t afraid of a little high-stakes gambling.” I arched an eyebrow. “You *do* have a soul, don’t you?”

“But of course.” Leviathan pressed his fingers to his sternum and withdrew an ancient-looking white chip. It was cracked and stained yellow, like old bone. He tossed it down with the rest and took a seat at the table. “Just be aware—I do play to win.”

“Good,” I said. *Exactly according to plan*. “So do I.”

This time, Leviathan dealt us in.

I checked my cards and kept my face neutral. Just like the Fourth, I didn’t have any intention of giving anyone any clues as to what my hand was. Good, or bad.

But internally, my heart was racing with excitement.

It was a good hand. The best I could have gotten with the cards that were left in the deck. A difficult hand to beat.

In fact, it was an impossible one.

The First took a hit. When he saw his third card, a growl emanated from beneath his white helmet.

He turned them over as he admitted defeat. He’d gone over. Twenty-four.

The Second took a hit, then folded with a sigh. He’d come close—Twenty-two. But he was over as well.

The Third took two hits before he was forced to fold. He might have actually been able to match my hand if he would have stayed before his third card was drawn, but he'd gotten a little too greedy. Twenty-eight. He was out.

The Fourth stayed, just like Leviathan and I were. When he turned his cards over, my chest thrummed with delight.

He had two nines. An eighteen, total.

Not a bad hand, but not as good as my own.

"Well, Joan? Would you like to do the honors?" Leviathan gestured to my hand. "Ladies first, after all. Let's see what you've got."

"Twenty." I tossed my cards down onto the table with a wry smile. "Beat that."

He couldn't. It didn't matter what cards Leviathan had. I'd been counting aces for the entire game. Keeping track of all the cards, just like Lock and I had practiced.

With only two cards in his hand, the best Leviathan could do was match my twenty.

A draw was far from a win.

"Well met, Joan. That's very cute." Leviathan's lips spread into a broad, pleased grin. "But not quite good enough."

As Leviathan flipped his cards over, I blinked down at his hand.

No. Something here was wrong.

The ace of hearts was already spent. So were the aces of diamonds and clubs.

On the table, I had the ace of spades and a nine—an easy twenty. By all accounts, it should have been the winning hand.

But there, right across from me, Leviathan had played the ace of hearts again, alongside a ten.

Twenty-one.

"You cheated," I snarled at Leviathan, shoving my cards aside. "You stupid bastard. Wipe that grin off your face. You can't trick us like that. You haven't won at all."

But when I reached across the table to reclaim the white chip with my name on it, The Fourth struck an arm out and placed his hand over mine.

I saw my own surprise in the reflection of his visor as I stared up at him, confused.

Slowly, he shook his head. *No.*

“He pulled that ace out of his sleeve,” I explained. Maybe the Riders hadn’t been counting the cards, but I certainly had. “I played the ace of hearts in the first round. Check the discard pile. I’m not wrong.”

Again, the Fourth shook his head.

I was stunned.

“What’s wrong with you?” I snapped at him, incensed. “Do you *want* to lose your soul to a cheat?”

The Fourth shook his head a third time as Leviathan began to chuckle.

Around the table, the rest of the Riders hung their heads in defeat. But Leviathan, on the other hand—he looked pleased as pie.

“We’re in Hell, sweetheart,” he said through his laughter. “Cheating in Hell isn’t just allowed—it’s practically *de rigueur*.”

As Leviathan swept each of our chips toward him across the table’s green felt top, I tried to speak—but I couldn’t. My throat was all locked up.

I tried to scream, but my lungs were deflated. When I tried to draw breath, my chest refused to rise. I couldn’t take in air.

It didn’t hurt. That was the worst part. I waited to feel cold, to feel pain, to feel *something*—but I didn’t.

Maybe I couldn’t.

Maybe I couldn’t feel anything at all anymore.

“Don’t worry though, Joan.” Leviathan raised the poker chip that held my soul to his lips and gave it a firm, smug kiss. “I’ll take good care of this. The best, in fact. It’s of more use to me than you could ever know.”

Like hell you will, I wanted to growl at him.

But it was no use. I was a passenger in my own body now. A bystander. A backseat Joan, trying to maintain some semblance of control over a vehicle that I was no longer driving.

If I could have, I would have reached out and snatched that chip right back from him, but even that was impossible now. My arm was just dead weight.

The only parts of my body I could still feel at all were my heart...and the place on my mound of Venus where Lock and I had mingled blood before I left his side.

Lock. I focused on that little ache on my palm with all of my energy. The more attention I poured into it, the more it hurt—but maybe that was a good thing.

Maybe it would save my soul.

Lock. We've been tricked. I'm in danger. Come find me.

"Why don't you take a little nap, Joan?" Leviathan flicked my chip into the air. As it twirled, I could already feel myself drifting off. "I've got big plans for you."

I was sure he did.

Leviathan had complete control over my body. He owned my soul. As my eyelids drooped shut and my consciousness faded, I knew he must have had command over my head now as well.

But my heart was still beating. And all the way in Greenriver, I could feel Lock's heart beating, too.

My heart—that was still my own.

I love you, Lock, I thought as hard as I could. I'm sorry. I love you. I love...

Everything was dark, then.

And unless Lock was able to save me...

All was lost.

LOCK

Greenriver was a long way from Las Vegas. An even longer way from Hell. But as I met with Mal in the darkness, I could still feel Joan from a distance. The bite I'd left in my mound of Venus throbbed gently with the beat of my wife's heart. Her blood was in me. She was mine.

Even from far away, we were still connected now. Bound by marriage, bound by sex. Bound by ichor and fate and yes—by love.

She was holding up her end of our plan. Now, it was high time I held up mine.

"Mal," I said in greeting as Mal emerged from the shadows of the trees. "Did ye get what I asked of ye?"

"Reckon this'll work?" Mal reached into his pocket and pulled out a silver locket on a long chain. "Helped myself to it from Ava's mother's jewelry box while she slept. She puts it on every morning, as soon as she wakes up."

"Aye. That should suffice." I unsheathed my dirk and glanced down at the wound on my hand. It had been my promise to Joan that I would save Ava's mother. But I wasn't sure I could do that on my own anymore. "Hand it here, then give me your arm. I'll need yer blood."

Mal arched an eyebrow. "Mine? Is yours no good anymore?"

"Aye." I closed my eyes and unfolded my wings, broad and white. "Ye could say that. Dunno that my blood will work for this anymore."

Mal blinked, taking in the sight of my new celestial accessories.

“Defected to Heaven then, have ya?” He snorted. “Didn’t think you were the type.”

“Yer right,” I assured him. “But sometimes the universe has a way of twisting yer arm, does it no?”

“S’pose fate must have you in one hell of a headlock, then.” His eyes met mine. “Was it worth it?”

I knew what he was really asking: *Did you do it for her?*

“Aye,” I confirmed. “Every bit.”

Mal gave me his hand. On the tip of my knife, I drew his blood. We squeezed several dark drops of into the locket, over a black and white picture of Ava’s mother surrounded by seven pretty redheaded children. All girls. Ava and her sisters, I presumed. Mal’s blood soaked into the dark parts of the photograph, blackening the ink while leaving the lighter parts unstained.

“Doubt that Ava’s ma will even realize we’re helpin’ her,” Mal commented as I snapped the locket shut and handed it back to him. “Maybe that’s for the best.”

“So long as it works.” I clapped him on the shoulder. “Thank ye, Mal.”

“No need.” He waved my words away. “She matters to Ava, and Ava matters to me. And after all...what’s a little light thievery and a few drops of blood? You might be an angel again—but I’m all demon. Always will be.”

“Best get it back to her before she notices it’s gone.” I glanced to Ava’s mother’s cottage. The lights were still off, and sunrise was a long way away yet. It wouldn’t be hard for Mal to return the locket, now charmed with the healing powers of infernal blood, before Ava’s mother was awake once more. “And Mal—”

I meant to warn him to be extra careful. Now that Joan and I had no chance of fulfilling our place in Leviathan’s prophecy, it would only be a matter of time before Leviathan set his sights on Mal and Ava next.

But before I could, the bite mark on my hand throbbed hot and painful. I hissed at the sensation.

Something was wrong.

“What is it?” Mal asked.

“Joan’s in danger.” A growl left my throat as I closed my eyes. In the darkness behind my eyelids, I could see her glow. Faint, and growing

fainter by the second. "I need to go."

"You need help?"

I shook my head and spread my wings wide. "Get that locket back as quickly as ye can, then head to Ava's. Make sure she's safe."

Mal gave me a single nod. "Godspeed then, angel."

I returned his nod then took to the skies.

If the Almighty would grant me speed right now, I'd take it.

The pain in my palm was growing, and somewhere out there, Joan's life was hanging in the balance. I didn't know how—we'd done everything we could to ensure that she was no longer of use to Leviathan or the Covenant and their sinister plans.

I only knew I had to get back to her before it was too late.

MY FLIGHT TOOK me not to Las Vegas, but to the barren desert beyond it. I flew with my eyes closed, following the only guides I had: the throb of Joan's heartbeat in the wound beneath my thumb and the glow of her soul in my mind's eye.

Out near a ragged cliffside in the Mojave. That was where I found her. But her glow didn't take me to her body.

Her glow was in the pocket of the man sitting next to her, perched behind a small table, sipping tea.

She was stretched and bound. Her wrists were tied to a wooden beam across her back. Her ankles were encircled with rope. Her eyes were closed.

A cross. He'd put her on a fucking *cross*.

The sight of the man who'd done the deed didn't surprise me. His salt and pepper hair, manicured goatee and icy blue eyes gave him away immediately.

"Leviathan." I touched down in the red-brown dirt a few yards away from him with a sneer on my lips. "Fancy seein' you here."

"Moloch." He raised his teacup to me, seemingly unfazed by my arrival. "I wondered how long it would take you to find me. Frankly... you're a little late."

"Right on time by my reckoning. I see ye've gone confused in your auld age." I gave a nod to Joan. "That's my wife ye've helped yerself to there. Best pack up yer tea party and go home before I decide ye havenae simply made a senile mistake."

“Oh, it’s no mistake, Lock.” As he spoke, I glared at the glow emanating from his pocket. Joan’s soul. It should have been in her chest, bright and strong. Instead, it was fading away in the lap of Leviathan’s slacks. “She gambled with me tonight. She lost. I thought about whisking her away somewhere safer...but truth be told, I hoped to speak with you one last time before I took my leave.”

“To what end?” I took a step forward so he could see the bulging veins of my neck and the cold rage in my eyes. “Surely ye don’t have a death wish—but if so, I’m more than happy to oblige.”

“I’m glad to hear you’re in an obliging mood.” Leviathan set his teacup aside and rose to his feet. “I want to make you an offer, Moloch. One that I think you’ll find difficult to refuse.”

“Ye’d be surprised,” I assured him, cracking my knuckles. “I’m a verrae temperamental man.”

“An angel, you mean.” He gestured to my wings. “Congratulations, by the way. It must be a thrill for you, the chance to return to your rightful place in Heaven.”

“No as much of a thrill it’ll be to feed ye yer own tongue.” I cracked my neck next in preparation, taking another step forward. “So ye’d best start waggin’ it before I lose my patience and cut it out of yer filthy mouth.”

“I don’t have an angel at my disposal yet,” Leviathan admitted. “I was thinking that you might be interested in coming to work for me now.”

“I’d rather just kill ye, to be honest.” I’d be slow about it. Ruthless. I’d make him bleed, make him ache, make him beg for death just so he didn’t have to endure a moment of torture more. “The longer ye talk, the better that idea’s soundin’, in fact.”

“You can’t kill me without killing her too. Not for as long as I own this.” He took the white chip of Joan’s soul from his pocket and flicked it into the air, then caught it with a grin. “She’s bound to me now, Moloch. Her soul is mine by right. Kill me and lose her forever. But in exchange for your cooperation, I’m more than happy to let the two of you live perfectly peaceful lives together. Play your cards right, and they might even be long ones.”

My heart twinged at the offer. It was a fair one. All I’d ever wanted, really. A life with Joan. No more fear of losing her. No more fear of anything anymore.

But to earn it by doing Leviathan's will...

No. It was a false promise at best.

No life where we were under his command would be peaceful.

Leviathan only dealt in destruction. In fire and ruin and pain.

"Interesting, but..." I took another step forward. "Nah. No interest in working for ye, or with ye, or even around ye. But if ye like...p'raps I can counter yer offer with one of my own."

"Can you?" Leviathan laughed. "I'm not sure what else you could possibly offer me now. I have your wife. I have the souls of the Four Riders of the Apocalypse as well."

He reached back into his pocket and drew out four more chips, all as white as Joan's.

A growl left my throat. Of course that was what he'd been after. The Covenant's little heist—it hadn't been a heist at all.

It had been a set-up. An excuse to get Joan and the Four Riders to a table in Avarice. Had Leviathan been there from the start, I wondered?

Probably not. He'd swept in at the last possible moment, most like. Cheated too, if I had to guess. That was his style.

"How about another gamble?" I suggested with a glance to Joan. It made my heart pang, seeing her tied. If she'd had the consciousness or ability to free herself, she wouldn't have let it happen to begin with. But without her soul...she was uncannily helpless. Only I could set her free again—and God help Leviathan once she was. "A game. I ken how ye like those."

"And you know me well, Moloch." Leviathan patted Joan's pale cheek, then wandered a little closer to me. I hated him for touching her. His hands were filth. They had no business being anywhere near my wife. I'd make him pay dearly for that. "You have my attention. But first...what are the stakes?"

"If I win, I want her soul back," I said simply. "If I lose, ye can have mine as well to do with what you will."

"Interesting...but I'm afraid I can't agree to those terms," he said with a shrug. "Joan's soul is worth far more to me now than yours is, Moloch. If you want to call my bet, you'll need to put a little more on the table to make it worth my while."

The temptation to kill him then was intense. But for as long as Joan's soul was in his possession, I couldn't do that without winning it back from

him.

If he died now, Joan's soul would be snuffed out right along with his.

"A soul for a soul," I insisted. "That's a fair deal if ever I've heard one."

"I know something that you don't." He grinned, almost teasingly. "Sweeten the deal, or it's off."

"My soul...and my obedience," I countered. Whatever he knew, he wasn't saying. Asking him for the information would only cost me more. "Ye cannae control me properly without both. If ye win, ye'll have me at your command, and I willnae try to undermine ye in the process. I'll be a willing servant to all yer ends. Loyal and true."

"Mm. Yes. You *are* a stubborn bastard, as I recall. Difficult to collar. Even the Almighty Himself couldn't manage that. Your obedience *and* your soul...a worthy offering, then." Leviathan crossed his arms over his chest, then nodded. "Agreed. So. What game will we be playing tonight, Moloch? More cards?"

"One ye cannae cheat at, ye wee bastard." My eyes locked on his. "I want a fight. Winner takes Joan's soul. If ye have a weapon, draw it. If no...not my problem."

"To the death... That's no game, Moloch." His eyes widened as he was stricken with the severity of his own mistake. "I agreed to a game. Fighting you isn't one."

"It is to me." I took a step forward, unsheathing my dirk with one hand as I summoned a ball of white-hot flame in my other. "And unfortunately for you, ye've already agreed to my terms."

He licked his lips as he looked between the dagger and the flame. His eyes shifted rapidly. I knew he was looking for a way out.

But this time, there wasn't one. Not for him.

"All right," he said, bristling as he gave me a nod of acceptance. "Do your worst."

A dark grin found my lips. "Oh, dinnae worry about that. I certainly will."

The fight went hard, but ended quick. Leviathan's strengths didn't lie in violence—at least, not any from his own hands. He did his best to dodge my attacks, leaping aside at every ball of celestial light I sent his way, but in the end, he was only prolonging the inevitable.

I was a man wrought from fury and war. He was merely a puppet master—one who had no strings here to pull.

I advanced on him little by little, until I had him pinned between the side of the cliff and my own thirst for his blood.

I took his neck in my hand and threw him down by it. Sank my dirk into his belly and his chest as deep as it would go, then twisted before I withdrew it so I could stab him again.

It wasn't easy, killing creatures like us. But I knew if I kept at it, eventually my dagger would hit something so vital, even Leviathan himself wouldn't recover.

Dead. That was how I wanted him. Cold and bleeding, without breath, without life.

I wouldn't stop until I was done.

"Spare me," Leviathan hissed as I held him down, readying my dirk for another strike. His wounds were dire ones. I'd beaten him within an inch of his life. An inch that I was more than happy to claim then and there. "Name your price, and it's yours."

I gritted my teeth. He'd taken my woman. He'd taken her fucking *soul* into his grubby little hands. Now that I'd won it back from him, my desire to kill him was strong. Almost undeniable.

But there were things more powerful in play here than my need for revenge.

Joan's soul wasn't the only thing he'd taken tonight that didn't belong to him.

As much as I hated bargaining with the bastard, there were still other important things on the line.

"I want the souls of the Four." It was a high price, but he *had* said to name it. "All of them, and I'll let ye go."

Beneath the choke of my hand, Leviathan had the audacity to laugh.

"Four souls for one life." He coughed through his chuckle, spitting blood. "A bold request, Moloch. But you know as well as I do that the math on that doesn't even come close to adding up. I can give you...one of them. Your pick."

"All of them," I said again. "All, or I'll kill ye now and take them anyway."

"Kill me now and they'll die with me too. Remember?" he croaked. "I don't think you want to find out what happens to the balance of the

universe then.”

Bile and iron filled my mouth. I spat it out on his face.

I hated him for it, but I knew he wasn’t wrong.

“The prophecy, then,” I growled, pressing down on his neck a little harder. “I want all of it. The truth, this time.”

“The truth for my life,” Leviathan rasped. He closed his eyes, then nodded. “All right. Deal.”

He licked his lips as I removed my hand from his windpipe. A rumble sounded as he cleared his throat.

“It’s simple, Moloch. Ancient words taken from the lips of Eve not long after she and Adam were thrown from Eden,” Leviathan revealed. “That apple she bit into held important knowledge, if you recall. Not just of good and evil—but of beginnings and ends.”

“Tell me,” I snarled through my teeth. “Say the words, or I’ll kill ye now.”

Leviathan took a breath, then let it out slowly. He gave me a nod.

“Four Kings of Hell. Their four fated mates. Four children—one from each union. One child born of Heaven and Hell. One child born of Hell and Earth. One born of Heaven and Earth...and one child born of Earth, and Earth alone. Once they’re all of age, the Four Riders will set out to claim them and war between Heaven and Hell will break out on Earth.”

“That means...” A fresh rage roared up inside me. I was tempted to kill him then and there—deals be damned. “Joan—ye took her tonight because she’s pregnant, isn’t she?”

“Of course she is. Freshly so.” A small smile appeared on Leviathan’s lips. It took every ounce of restraint in my body—and I had very little to spare—to stop from caving his teeth in beneath my fist. “A baby conceived of Heaven and Earth. Yours. Angel...and human. You stupid creatures played right into my—”

I hit him before he could finish. Nice and hard on the side of his head. His skull cracked back against the rocks beneath him. His eyes rolled back.

In an instant, he was out cold.

My own head was reeling as I dug into his pockets, searching for the white poker chip that contained Joan’s soul. As I pulled out all five of the chips Leviathan had claimed tonight, I shuffled through my emotions like a dealer working a deck of cards.

Fury. Elation. Fear. Shame. Joan and I had agreed that giving up our chance at parenthood was the only way to keep the world safe. It was a sacrifice that we'd made to prevent the apocalypse. To save all life on Earth.

Now, we'd only helped Leviathan get that much closer to ending it all forever. For good.

The chips each had a name written on them. Conquest. War. Want. Death. These were the riders who would someday claim the children born of the prophecy.

One of which was now my own babe, a new life that had just been stirred in Joan's womb.

I was tempted to take the whole lot of the chips. Leaving the souls of the Four Riders in Leviathan's hands surely wouldn't lead to anything good.

But a deal was a deal. My victory for Joan's soul. Leviathan's information for his life. The souls of the Four were still his by right. There would be repercussions if I took what wasn't mine to take. If it hadn't been for Joan and the baby, I might have been willing to brave them anyway.

But I had other vows to keep now. The most precious ones that had ever left my lips.

I'd sworn to protect Joan. Couldn't do that if I had the ill wishes of a broken bargain bearing down on me.

Of course, that didn't mean I had to leave the chips where Leviathan could find them.

I moved to a pile of stones near the edge of the rising cliffside and buried the Riders' chips beneath them. The Souls of the Four would still be Leviathan's—if he could ever find them, at any rate.

Joan's soul, I clenched tight in the palm of my hand as I went to her side.

She was unconscious still, deathly pale and strikingly cold. I unwound the ropes that bound her wrists and gently pulled her down from the cross Leviathan had tied her to. When I pressed a kiss to her lips, it gave me a shiver.

This was twice now since I'd married her that she'd been on the brink of dying. I had no intention of letting that happen again.

I placed the chip bearing her name on it on the center of her chest. It glowed white for a moment...then, golden.

I watched as it sank beneath her skin. The warmth began to return to her body a moment later.

From within her now, she was glowing golden, too.

Her lashes fluttered, but she didn't wake. Maybe that was for the best.

I was still reeling with the news of her pregnancy. I dropped my hand to her stomach and caressed it through her dress.

After all she'd been through tonight, she deserved a rest. I'd tell her in the morning—though, I didn't even know what morning would look like yet.

Would she be happy? Angry with me? Terrified?

Probably a mixture of all three and more.

But that was something we'd face tomorrow once I'd gotten her somewhere beyond Leviathan's reach.

Lucifer's safehouse in Vermont was far from here yet. If I were Abaddon, I might have opened the Abyss to shorten the distance, but I was only me. Moloch. Fallen angel, returned to grace. My wings could fly us anywhere, but I didn't dare risk the time it would take to cross the continental US.

Joan was pregnant with my child. The prophecy that we'd done our best to avoid playing into was now closer to being fulfilled than ever.

We couldn't chance the possibility that we'd be intercepted in the skies on the way.

I needed to take her somewhere safe. Somewhere that no one—not Leviathan, not Mammon, not Beelzebub or any other demon of Hell—could safely enter. Somewhere they didn't dare to tread.

Somewhere that, even for bastard sinners like me, was never far away.

JOAN

When I woke up the next morning, the bed beneath me felt like Heaven. The world was gently white and golden all around. I rolled over instinctively, searching for Lock's warm body with my hands. Instead, my fingers found feathers. Long, sleek white ones. Lock's wings.

My husband really was an angel now. And based on the decor of the large room we slept in—all calla lilies and tasteful oil paintings of cherubs frolicking with swans...

Was this Heaven? It certainly looked the way I would have imagined it.

When I touched my fingertips to my chest, I didn't feel that icy chill in my heart anymore. The fact that I was here and not tied up in some dungeon somewhere meant that Lock must have succeeded.

He'd saved me once again.

He'd given me back my soul.

I closed my eyes for a moment and let my body nestle back down into the pillows.

At least Heaven had comfy beds.

"So it wasn't all just a dream," I whispered to no one in particular as I ran my fingers down Lock's wing.

"No," a voice said from the doorway. "No, it certainly was not."

I cracked my eyes open to find a tall, handsome blond man standing in the doorway. He had wings on his back, just like Lock's and was dressed

head to toe in a white shirt, shoes and slacks.

“Are you...Michael?” I guessed. He looked a little less ferocious than Gabriel had, but no less displeased to see me here.

“I am,” he confirmed. He didn’t look keen on telling me much more.

“Funny. I always imagined angels would smile more.” I rubbed my eyes and stretched. My body was sore, but that was to be expected.

It had been one hell of a night.

“Maybe we would smile more, if there weren’t so many obnoxious human women wandering around getting married to demons and throwing off our plans,” Michael scoffed.

“Your plans, huh?” A tired laugh escaped my throat. I rolled over, gave Lock a kiss on the place where his wings were rooted in his shoulder blades, then rolled out of bed. “If I’ve learned anything about plans over the last few weeks, it’s that *ours* don’t really matter. You all worship the Almighty up here, don’t you?”

“We carry out His will, yes.” Michael’s eyes narrowed as I crossed the room to a washing basin. There was warm water in a pitcher beneath it. I sloshed some out into the larger bowl and started splashing it up onto my face. “As we should all seek to do.”

“Has it ever occurred to you that none of us has a choice in the matter?” Whatever I’d had planned for this morning, arguing theology with an angel certainly hadn’t been on my to-do list. And yet, here I was anyway. “If your Almighty is all-powerful, it seems an awful lot like this is all going exactly according to His plans.”

“Then you obviously haven’t been paying attention to the news lately.” Michael came up behind me, and I stiffened. I didn’t know what he was playing yet, but if he tried to attack me, I needed to be ready to retaliate. And fast.

“Been a little busy,” I quipped, smoothing my hands over my face to wick the water away.

“Allow me to catch you up, then.” Michael reached around me, and I clenched my jaw. But instead of attacking me, he merely grabbed a white hand towel from the side of the basin and pressed it into my hands. “The balance of the world is more precariously out of alignment than ever. The UN is currently discussing declaring war on no less than sixteen countries—some of them members of the UN itself. The Amazon is regrowing. The

Sahara is a full-fledged oasis. And in Washington, D.C., last night, the entirety of the capitol building flooded.”

“Well, you know.” I mopped my face clean of the water and shrugged. “That’s hurricane season for you.”

Michael scoffed. “They didn’t flood with water.”

“Ah.” I handed the towel back to him. “Blood?”

He nodded and placed the towel aside. “Blood.”

“Sounds like those senators must’ve pissed off someone upstairs.” I searched around for a toothbrush. While this may have been a good time to wake Lock up, I didn’t want to stir him quite yet. He’d had a rougher day yesterday than anyone. I could handle myself—and he’d earned the extra sleep. “I don’t see how any of this is my problem.”

“It’s your problem,” Michael said sternly, “because it’s all happening because of you.”

He grabbed my wrist and wheeled me around to face him. I knew he must have wanted to strike fear in me. Fearful people were much easier to convince to behave.

But what was it that the angels were always saying in the Bible?

Be not afraid?

“All I’ve done is marry the man I love, Michael. That’s all. Besides.” I met his icy gaze with a cool, stony look of my own. “He’s an angel again. Doesn’t that mean you two are on the same side now?”

“He’s a butcher and a brute,” Michael sneered. “A warmongering rebel. It doesn’t matter what color of wings he wears. He’s always going to be *him*.”

“Yeah,” I agreed, smiling a little. “That’s what I like about him.” I twisted my wrist in his hand. This was cute and all, but I’d kind of been going through a lot lately. Michael’s threats seemed like the least of it now. “You gonna let me go? If we’re going to be chatting so close like this, you’ll enjoy it more if I brush my teeth first.”

“Honestly, I’m just trying to think of one good reason not to kill you right now.” The look in his eyes told me he wouldn’t feel bad about doing it, either.

I flexed my fingers experimentally. I knew I should have been scared, but the only thought in my mind in that moment was that I hoped I still had some of Lock’s demonic firepower within me. Fear didn’t even enter

the equation. After everything else we'd been up against, the prospect of fighting for my life against an angel...

At this point, it felt like par for the course.

But before it came to that, Lock's grumbling brogue cut through the tension from across the room.

"Ye can't kill her, Mikey," Lock mumbled. He shifted into an upright position on the bed and cracked his neck lazily. "Don't be daft."

Mikey? My lips twitched. I stifled a laugh.

Lock certainly had a way with words.

Michael—*Mikey*—jerked my wrist to the side and summoned a ball of crackling hot light in his palm right there at the side of my face. I felt my pulse race, but that was only adrenaline.

"And why can't I?"

"On account of she's pregnant, ye wee twit." Lock rubbed his shoulder and disentangled himself from the sheets. "I know how precious you angels are about harmin' the innocent, and Joanie's got my seed in her womb. If ye harm her, ye harm the bairn, too." He shrugged as he got to his feet. "So. Ah. I believe the phrase is *checkmate*, no?"

Michael and I looked to each other, then to Lock, then back to each other.

He dropped my wrist. The ball of light in his hand faded away. The expression on Michael's face was a tentative *what the fuck?*

It was actually...kind of reassuring.

What the fuck was exactly what I was feeling right now, too.

"What do you mean I'm pregnant, Lock?" If he was bluffing, I didn't mean to ruin the effect. But...this was as much news to me as it was to Michael. "We've been using condoms, and except for last night..."

It didn't make sense. Not only was it far too soon to possibly know whether I was pregnant or not...weren't we supposed to be tied up in some kind of fateful prophecy?

Any child that Lock and I had together was supposed to be half-demon, half-human. So said Leviathan's ancient foretelling about the end of the world. When Lock became an angel again, it should have prevented us from conceiving at all. We'd agreed on it. A worthy sacrifice.

We would never become parents to keep Leviathan from ever having any chance of destroy the Earth.

But now...

“See for yerself,” Lock told Michael. “Ye can tell these things, surely?”

“I can, but...” Michael looked to me, then reached toward my belly. “Do you mind?”

I took a step back and arched an eyebrow. “Depends. Are you going to blast a beam of light through my gut?”

Michael shook his head. “I won’t hurt you. You have my word.”

I didn’t know how good the word of an angel was...but Lock gave me a nod of encouragement. He didn’t look worried.

“Okay,” I said. “Go ahead. Probably less awkward than peeing on a stick, right?”

Michael pressed his palm to my belly and closed his eyes. I tensed as a white glow emanated from between his fingers, but even though it was warm, it didn’t burn.

It felt...nice. Comforting, even. Like eating a gooey chocolate chip cookie straight from the oven and washing it down with a glass of cold milk.

After a few seconds, I closed my eyes too.

It was the strangest thing. In my mind’s eye, I could still see the glow from Michael’s hand. But now, instead of being against my skin, it was inside me. I saw it in my womb, shimmering around something small and golden.

A tiny, precious pearl.

My eyes snapped open in an instant when I saw it. A second later, Michael opened his as well.

“It’s true,” he told me. “You’re...yes. You’re with child.”

“I really am.” I furrowed my brow. “I don’t know how, but...yeah. I saw it too.”

Michael lowered his hand from my stomach and took a step back. He raked his hands through his hair, shaking his head.

“This...it does change things. Obviously.” He looked to Lock. “How did you know?”

“Leviathan confirmed it before we came here last night,” Lock revealed, moving to my side. He wound his arms around me, and I pressed myself to his chest in return. “I reckon he intended on keeping Joan captive until she gave birth so he could raise the child for himself.”

“But *how*, Lock?” I asked. “The prophecy said—”

“We havenae been working off the full prophecy,” Lock replied with a shrug. “There’s, ah...more to it than what Leviathan originally let on. He’s been lyin’ about it, leaking bits and pieces—some right, some wrong. Whatever he has to do to get us to play right into his hands.”

“Tell me,” Michael demanded. The furrow in his brow softened a moment later. For a second, he looked genuinely exhausted. “Please.”

Lock pressed a kiss to my temple, then paced the room as he explained what had happened after I’d been knocked out. The fact that Leviathan was still in possession of the Riders’ souls was...troubling, to say the least. What he was planning on doing with them now, we still didn’t know. We just knew it wouldn’t be anything good.

But now that we had the true prophecy—the *full* prophecy—there was a more pressing matter to worry about.

“One child of Heaven and Hell,” Lock recited. “One of Hell and Earth. One of Heaven and Earth...and one of Earth, and Earth alone.”

“Ava,” I whispered. “She’s the only one of us left. Do you think Leviathan will be targeting her next?”

“Were I a bettin’ man... Aye. I’d say it’s certain,” Lock said with a nod.

“I’m inclined to agree,” said Michael. “And I don’t believe the two of you will be safe from him either, for that matter. With the souls of the Four Riders of the Apocalypse in his hands... He’s more powerful than ever now. I can offer you both sanctuary here in Heaven for as long as you like, of course. We can’t be certain that anywhere on Earth will be truly safe.”

“That’s awful kind of ye,” Lock arched a brow. “What’s the catch?”

“Well... If you’re agreeable to the idea, Heaven is more than happy to take charge of your child once it’s born.”

Lock snorted. “Not gonna happen.”

“Not on your life, *Mikey*,” I agreed.

I didn’t know how I felt about this pregnancy yet. The fact that it was happening at all was giving me a serious case of emotional whiplash.

But that didn’t mean there was a single cell in my body that was giving up our baby to Heaven without one hell of a fight.

“I had a feeling you’d say that,” Michael held his hands up in surrender. “In that case, I can offer you the same thing I offered Lucifer

and his bride. Raise the child well on Earth. Love it. Protect it. Should you fail to do that, the fate of the world as we know it is all but lost.”

“And Ava?” I asked. “Are you going to leave her alone as well?”

“I...” Michael drew in a breath, then looked away from me. “I understand now that there are machinations at work surrounding you and your friends that I wasn’t previously aware of. I can promise that I won’t harm her unless I have to. But should she get pregnant—should her child, or any of the others, fall into Leviathan’s clutches...”

I glared daggers at Michael. If he laid so much as a hand on Ava—on *any* of my friends or their children—I would go down into Hell, find enough cursed iron to forge a sword out of, and drive it through Michael’s smug, holy heart myself.

But a glance from Lock told me that my threats wouldn’t be necessary.

“It’s no gonna come to that,” he assured Michael. “Ava is Malacoda’s mate. She still doesnae even ken who he is, and he has enough self-control not to change that.”

“I’m sure you’re right,” Michael said with a nod. “But if Leviathan gets hold of even one of these children, we have no idea what damage he can cause on Earth as a result. We don’t know how long Malacoda and Ava will be able to fight fulfilling their own destiny. The currents of fate are strong.”

“We’ll just have to be stronger then, won’t we?” Lock held his hand out to Michael, and after a moment, Michael took it.

“I won’t hurt her if I don’t have to,” Michael said as he shook. “You have my word.”

“And you have mine that you’ll never have reason to,” Lock countered. “I may be an angel once more now, but Mal is still a King of Hell. And in Hell, we protect our own.”

As Michael left Lock and me to discuss our next moves, I found that my hands were shaking.

There was so much to take in now. So many lives that I cared about were at stake.

“We’re really doing this, then? Becoming...becoming parents?” I folded my hands over my belly and tried to imagine the little life growing inside me. It was difficult. I couldn’t even feel anything yet. No twinge of implantation. No morning sickness. No...anything, really.

But if the Archangel Michael himself said that I was pregnant...

I didn't see how he could possibly be wrong.

"How do ye feel about it?" Lock put an arm around me and drew me to the bed so we could sit down. "Are ye...happy? Sad? Scared?"

"A little scared," I admitted. "A lot surprised. And...yeah. Happy, too, I think. At least, I will be, once I've had some time to get used to the idea." I glanced up at him. "How do you feel?"

Lock bit his lip and stared down at my stomach for a long moment. Then, he slipped to the floor and dropped to his knees, taking my hands in his.

"I feel like ye've remade me, Joanie," he professed. "When I lost ye, I was a broken man. When I found ye again, I was a fuckin' terrified one. But now..." He knitted his brow together and nodded. "Ye've given me more than I could have ever dreamed of. More, maybe, than a bastard like me even deserves."

"You deserve to have what you want, Lock." I raised a hand to his cheek and ran my fingers through his beard. "If that's this..."

"Aye. It is." His green eyes gleamed as he looked up at me. "I want ye, and I want our bairn, and I want...Fuck, Joan. I want a life with ye. The chance to build somethin' good. Somethin' perfect. Somethin' forever and somethin' ours. If ye'll join me in that..."

"Of course I will." My voice caught in my throat, which was suddenly tight and tense. "I love you, Lock. I don't know that I'm ready for this, but I will be. I'll find a way."

"No, lass," Lock breathed. "*We'll* find a way."

Lock dipped down to kiss my stomach, and finally, I felt something. A little flutter of wings. When he shifted up to place a kiss on my lips as well, the sensation only intensified.

"I love ye too, Joan." Lock broke the kiss for just a moment to murmur against my lips. "I love ye fierce, and I love ye forever."

Then, he kissed me again.

With Lock's warm, firm mouth against my own, I felt like I was flying. Soaring through the clouds. Walking on air.

I didn't know what would happen next, but I knew that we were in this together.

And when Lock and I were together, we were dangerous. We always had been. We always would be.

Between the two of us, there was nothing we couldn't do.

JOAN***Four Months Later******Woodstock, Vermont***

Before the attack hit, we'd barely even made it through the front door. "JOAN!" Bea shouted my name, half accusation, half excited howl. She launched herself across the cabin's kitchen and nearly tackled me in a hug. My baby bump was the only thing holding her back from glomping me straight onto the floor.

"Hey, Bea." I laughed as she rubbed her cheek furiously against mine and wound my arms around her shoulders, hugging her back just as tight. "Long time no see, huh?"

"Joan Bouchard, you are *never* allowed to disappear like that again," Bea scolded me. "You've missed so much!"

"Believe me...I know." I gave Bea a kiss on the cheek, then we moved aside so Lock could haul in our bags. Hell might have had Illusion to cater to those seeking a luxury shopping experience, but the wardrobe selection in Heaven's Paradise certainly hadn't disappointed either.

Bea and I caught up for a little while at the kitchen table while Lock went out to the yard to find Don and Lucifer, who were apparently busy chopping wood.

“You won’t believe how much Lock is going to enjoy doing *basic yard work*,” Bea said with a roll of her eyes. “Living here is like some kind of macho playground for them. We’ve got enough firewood now to last us for ten winters at least—and don’t even get me started on their opinions of *lawn care*. It’s insane!”

“You seem really happy here, Bea.” I let my eyes wander around the kitchen, from the cast iron skillets that hung over the massive stove to the pretty jars of spices, all neatly arranged in savory rainbow rows. “I hope I can be too.”

“You’ll hate it for a while. It’ll certainly be a change of pace for you.” Bea reached across the table and squeezed my hand, then gave me a wink. “But it grows on you. Promise. Life is...simpler here. Nothing hunting you down. Nothing trying to kill you. The biggest dramas are when Evie and Don have differing opinions on pierogi recipes. And even then, they’re only at each other’s throats for a couple of hours at a time. If that.”

At the mention of Evie’s name, I glanced at the stairs.

“Is Evie, um...around?” I didn’t know why I felt so shy asking about her. We’d been best friends, once upon a time. All of us had. She was the missing part of our group, a woman who we’d all loved enough to give up our memories to protect her child. The person who’d been erased from our lives as a result. But during our time in Heaven, Lock had bullied the angels into giving me my memories back. All of them.

I was eager to meet Evie. Or...remeet her.

Or whatever.

But I was a little nervous, too.

It really had been a long time.

“Let’s go to the nursery. We’ll find her there.” Bea grinned and took my hand in hers, pulling me to my feet. “She wanted to give us time to catch up before she crashed our little reunion. Maybe she’s done getting the kids down for their naps.”

We tiptoed up the stairs to the nursery quietly. If the kids were asleep, the last thing I wanted to do was ruin Evie’s efforts by waking them up.

We found her sitting in a rocking chair in the corner of the nursery with the curtains closed. The entire room glowed gently blue and gold

from a lamp in the corner, which had a shade that spun slowly and cast its light through tiny cut-outs of stars.

She had a sleeping baby that I assumed to be Abbie tucked in the crook of one arm. A chubby, dark-haired toddler was draped over her other shoulder. That must have been Lily. She was conked out as well. The still-steaming mug of tea on the end table next to Evie told me she hadn't been planning on joining them, but she'd fallen fast asleep as well.

"She's beautiful," I whispered to Bea as we lingered in the doorway. "All three of them are. Should we...try to wake her up?"

"Oh, honey. Absolutely not." Bea stifled a snort of amusement behind her hand. "You don't know it yet, but once that baby of yours is finally out into this world...you're going to realize exactly how precious sleep is. And you'll want to rain hellfire down on anyone who dares disturb you from what little shut-eye you can get."

"We'll let her sleep, then," I agreed. I glanced over at Bea. "Do you, um. Do you like it? Being a mom?"

"Best thing I've ever done," Bea said without hesitation. "Do you think you will?"

"I never expected this life for myself, but...I dunno." I cupped my hand under the gentle swell of my belly. "It feels right. Especially here with the two of you. It's like...we're supposed to be doing this."

"It does." Bea's soft smile shifted just a smidge more wistful. "I wish Ava was here to do it with us too."

"I do wish Ava was here," I said, choosing my words with care. "But ah...you're aware that there's a prophecy about the four of us, right?"

"Leviathan's plan to end the world?" Bea didn't sound even a little amused. Leviathan had full control of the business she'd been raised to manage now. Thanks to Don, she'd narrowly avoided becoming Leviathan's own daughter-in-law to boot. "I don't like it, but I'm aware."

"Lock got the full prophecy out of him before we took off for Heaven," I revealed.

"Really?" Bea frowned. "What did it say?"

"One child of Heaven and Hell..." I began.

"That's Lily, isn't it?" Bea nodded to the dark-haired toddler drooling on Evie's shoulder. "Luke was an angel when she was conceived, and Evie had just become Queen of Hell."

“Right. Then...one child of Hell and Earth.” I squeezed her hand. “That’s Abbie.”

“What will your baby be?” Bea asked. “Do you know?”

“We found out just before we arrived that we’re having a girl,” I whispered, rubbing my hand over my baby bump. “We’re going to name her Hazel. We’re pretty sure that she was conceived right after Lock became an angel again...so that would make her the child of Heaven and Earth.”

“It’s a pretty name,” Bea said approvingly. “I’m happy for you, Joan. Really. Even...in spite of everything else.”

“I’m happy too,” I admitted. “But...I’m worried about Ava. And Mal, for that matter.”

“If they get back together...if they have a child...I wonder what it will be?”

“I’m guessing another girl. A child of Earth alone.”

“Wouldn’t Mal have to...become human for that to happen?”

“I think so,” I said. “Maybe that will help buy us some time. As soon as their baby is born, I think things will kick off here on Earth. For better or for worse. If he can avoid becoming human before he and Ava, ah...”

“Inevitably fall into bed together?” Bea suggested with a breath of a laugh. “I mean, it’s going to happen eventually. It did for the rest of us.”

“Right,” I agreed. “But if they can hold off on getting pregnant until Luke and Don and Lock are able to either burn out Leviathan or convince the angels to help us for a change...”

“They might actually have a chance to fall back in love...quietly. Calmly. You know. The proper way.”

“Without anyone trying to kill them,” I added.

Bea scoffed. “Would be nice.”

“Do you think we can warn Ava?” I asked. “I know Lock had his reasons for keeping me in the dark for so long. I mean, I even asked him to, before all our memories were wiped. But admittedly...it would have been a lot easier to coordinate if we hadn’t lost our memories at all.”

“I’ve thought about that too,” Bea said. “But...knowing what you know now. Do you really think if you’d remembered being in love with Lock from the first time you met again, you would have been able to help yourself around him?”

“No,” I admitted. Even in this short time we’d been apart since arriving here in Woodstock, my heart panged a little at his absence from my side. We’d spent so much time together over the last several months, it felt like the space next to me was palpably missing something without him there to fill it. “I would’ve jumped him, ripped his clothes off and climbed him like a tree.”

Bea laughed. “I know what you mean. I feel the same about Don. And I think the men all know it, too. They’ve had thousands of years to perfect their self-control. We’ve only had a little sliver of our lifetimes to do the same.”

“Maybe...we could at least warn her,” I suggested. “I’ve been meaning to call and check up on her mom anyway. It couldn’t hurt to remind her to stay extra safe, right?”

“With Leviathan on the hunt for the last child in the prophecy and—God, who even knows what plans the angels are making right now...” Bea nodded. “I’ll take you to your room and you can call her. In the meantime...”

We watched as Lily began to kick her little feet in her sleep. She was cute—but definitely in danger of waking Evie up.

“Maybe I’ll try to get the girls into the beds so Evie can get some proper rest.” Bea drew me back out into the hall. “Come on. Your room is just this way.”

The room that they’d prepared for Lock and me here was beautiful. The furniture was all antique and looked handmade. A cast iron wood stove was in one corner next to a rocking chair, and there was a balcony just a few feet away from the bed.

I pulled out my phone and stepped out, glancing up across a beautiful mountainous green forest below while I waited for Ava to pick up.

“Hello? Joan?” Ava’s voice was a little higher in pitch than normal. She sounded stressed.

“Hey, Ava. Sorry I haven’t—”

“Oh, Joan. Don’t be silly. I know you’re busy. I’m glad you called.”

I was grateful that she cut me off. I knew I hadn’t been in touch as much as I would have liked, but in the grand scheme of things...explaining why I’d been so absent felt more difficult with every passing day.

A lot had happened since we’d last spoken. More and more was happening all the time.

Sometimes, I wondered if it would ever come to a satisfying, comfortable end.

“It’s good to hear your voice,” I admitted in lieu of an explanation. “How’s your mom doing?”

“Better, yeah. The chemo must be taking now. Either that or all the woo-woo stuff she’s doing on the side is finally working.”

“I’m glad to hear that.” A smile found my lips. Maybe Lock’s plan to heal Ava’s mother had worked after all. Fingers crossed, anyway. “And how are you?”

Ava gave a short, high laugh. “Busy, honestly. There’s, ah...an event tonight. I’m running around like a headless chicken trying to get ready for it.”

“An event, huh?” Knowing what Ava’s hometown was like, it was probably some kind of barn dance or county fair. Greenriver was a sleepy, peaceful kind of town. It wasn’t exactly known for high-stakes social scenarios. But that begged the question: why did Ava sound so tense? “Are you nervous or something? Hot date?”

I hoped not. Somewhere in Greenriver, just out of sight, Mal was still watching over Ava with care. If she was going out with someone tonight, he wouldn’t be happy about it. It wasn’t Ava that needed to be nervous, really—it was any man who laid so much as a hand on her. If I knew one thing about the men of Hell, it was that they didn’t like to share.

Even if the object of their affections didn’t remember who they were anymore.

“I wish I could get into it, but it’s...kind of a lot. My mom—” A shattering noise came from Ava’s end of the phone, like she’d just dropped something made of glass. “Ah, crap! Broke my perfume bottle...ugh. It’s everywhere now, and I don’t really have time...”

“Oof.” I licked my lips and frowned. I wanted to fill Ava in—at least, as much as I safely could—but it sounded like Ava was a lot busier than I was at the moment. “I’ll let you go then. We can talk when you’ve got more time. But, Ava...”

“Yeah?”

“Be careful out there, okay? Things have been...weird since Bea’s wedding. For all of us, you know.”

Ava snorted. I could hear her trying to mop up the broken glass in the background. “Yeah...yeah, you’re definitely right about that. But don’t

worry. I may not a badass like you, Joan, but I *do* know what I'm doing. Trust me, all right?"

My frown deepened. I'd just been trying to warn her to keep an eye out for any dangers that might be coming her way. But from the sounds of things—*trust me, all right*—Ava was up to something of her own tonight.

Something that she wasn't eager about filling me in about at the moment.

What *was* she doing tonight?

"Of course I trust you," I said slowly. "Just, now, more than ever... don't let your guard down. I want you to stay safe. That's all."

"I'll do my best. And I hope you stay—*fuck!*" Ava hissed in pain.

"Ava? You okay?"

"Just cut myself on the glass. No big deal—just a bad omen. Ugh, I gotta go deal with this." She made a kiss noise into the phone. "Love you, Joan. Talk soon!"

Bad omen? For what, I wondered?

But it didn't sound like Ava had the time or interest to explain.

I made the kiss noise back at her. "Love you too, Ava. Talk soon."

I hung up the phone with a cold, slick feeling in my stomach. I'd wanted to tell Ava everything. Everything that I could. I couldn't spill the beans about her past relationship with Mal yet—he wouldn't have liked that, and it might have put Ava in more danger from Heaven and Hell alike than the knowledge was worth. But it would have been nice to warn her about the prophecy, at least. *One child born of Earth alone...* that seemed like an important thing for her to know.

If Ava somehow fell into bed with Mal—and I knew now how easily Leviathan and the other members of the Covenant were able to pull the strings to make that happen—she needed to at least be aware of what it might mean for her. If she got pregnant...

I sighed. Maybe I was being too anxious. Ava had asked me to trust her, and it wasn't like she had a penchant for rolling into bed with strange men anyway.

Unlike Bea, Evie and me, Ava had escaped college with her virginity intact. She was convinced that any man she slept with would die from the experience.

The prophecy about our children wasn't the only one that Ava was wrapped up in. Thanks to Ava's mother's witchy inclinations, she'd been

bound by divinations concerning her fate for her entire life.

“Are ye all right, Joanie?” Lock called up from the grass below the balcony.

I laughed when I saw him, breaking my frown. He was shirtless, covered in sweat, a little out of breath...and holding a *massive* axe. His hair was askew and he had a small cut on one cheekbone, leaking pearly angelic blood.

He looked like he’d been having the time of his life.

Maybe we really could be happy here after all.

“I’m fine. Just got done talking to Ava.”

“Did ye?” Lock rubbed the back of his neck. “How’s her ma doin’?”

“Better. By a lot, it sounds like. Whatever you and Mal did...it obviously worked.”

Lock bowed his head with relief. “That’s...aye. Verrae good, then. I’m glad to hear it.”

I tucked my phone away and leaned over the balcony’s rail, smiling down at him. “I see Don and Luke have introduced you to the joys of chopping wood.”

“Chopping wood?” Lock arched an eyebrow, then shook his head. “Nah. We were just chuckin’ a few axes at each other. Good, clean fun.”

“Lock!” My mouth fell open. I wasn’t sure whether to be furious with him, or just laugh some more. “You boys have an exceptionally strange definition of *good clean fun*.”

“Aye, well. Unless yer intending on temptin’ me with some dirty fun instead...” Lock smirked with a glimmer of hopefulness in his eyes, teasing me. “Ye wouldnae be, ah...interested in that at the moment, would ye?”

“Might be.” I smirked back at him, bit my lip and beckoned him up to the balcony with a come-hither twitch of my finger. “Convince me.”

Lock unfolded his wings, now white as virgin snow, and set himself aloft with them. He rose to the balcony’s level slowly, dropping the axe behind him.

“Is me havin’ my shirt off no convincin’ enough anymore?” Lock’s wings flapped just hard enough to allow him to hover several inches taller than me on the other side of the rail.

“It might be.” I pressed my palm over his heart, relishing the feel of its beat through his skin, then shifted my thumb up to the cut on his cheek so

I could wipe away his opalescent blood before it ran down into his beard. “But you’re hurt, Lock. Sure you’re up for it?”

“Just a scratch. Auld Lucifer’s a wee bit out of practice, it seems. Needs to work on his aim.” He folded his hand over mine and held my fingertips firmly against his cheek. “But truthfully, Joanie...I dinnae think anything can hurt me anymore. Not so long as I have ye.” He moved his other hand to my belly, where my baby bump was just starting to properly fill out enough to show. “Both of ye. Ye’ve my heart and my soul between the two of ye. As long as yer safe and yer here with me...Nah. Nothin’ else matters.”

I stared at him for a long moment, feeling that familiar warmth that always filled me when I saw his face. “You think we can be happy here?”

Lock frowned. “Do ye no?”

“I’m...warming up to the idea still.” Lock was a warrior, after all. Always looking for his next battle. And I was, in my own way, a warrior and a wanderer as well. “I’ve never really...never had a real home before. Not anywhere that I’ve been able to settle for long, you know?”

Lock chuckled and moved his hand to my neck, drawing our bodies closer. “I think we’ll be happier than ye can imagine, mo leannan. And even if yer no...things won’t stay like this forever. Once this end of the world business dies down—”

“Will it ever?”

“The world’s always endin’, Joanie. Has been since the beginning. Sometimes, more than others—but there are good people here on Earth. Good ones in Heaven and Hell as well. And so long as there are good people willin’ to fight for what they care about...aye. I think everything will come around eventually. And once it does...” Lock tilted my lips up toward his. “We can settle down with wee Hazel, or we can go anywhere in the world with the bairn in a wee sling I’ll carry across my chest. Whatever ye like—I’m happy anywhere with you by my side.”

“Is this the part where you tell me that I’m your home?” I teased.

“Nah.” Lock chuckled, then dipped down so his face was mere inches away from mine. “This is the part where I kiss ye, and ye kiss me back, then I take ye into our new bedroom and christen the mattress by fuckin’ ye so hard on it, it breaks the bed in two.”

My heart leapt up in my chest at this suggestion. My thighs clenched together involuntarily and in my belly...

Fuck. This was right. Even if it did take some getting used to...

Lock was mine, and I was his.

Together, wherever we went, we'd make into a home.

"Compelling suggestion," I said, leaning into him.

"No a suggestion," Lock assured me. His breath was warm against my lips and his green eyes were full of love. "Just what's gonna happen, innit? Destiny. Fate."

Lock took me into his arms and kissed me so intensely, it felt like some small part of him still believed this might be the last time he ever kissed me again.

But I knew better than that now.

We were safe here. We were together. For good, this time.

We were going to be parents.

We were in love.

Even if our love always felt like any moment might be our last...I could live with that.

We'd love hard and reckless and passionate. We'd fight anything that came our way. We'd beat it. We'd win.

And until then...

I smiled against Lock's lips and pulled him over the rail of the balcony by the loops of his belt.

We had a bed to break.

MAL

From the dark and shadows of Greenriver's forests, I watched over her like a beast in the night.

As I tracked her lithe little body slipping out the front door of her small cottage, I was well aware of how good it would feel to hunt her. To take her.

I'd bound from the trees, teeth bared, cock hard. I'd pin her down in the warm, rain-kissed earth, bite her neck and part her thighs. She could be Little Red Riding Hood—with that deep auburn hair of hers, she certainly fit the role.

I could be her big bad wolf.

But tonight, I wasn't stalking prey, though Ava was certainly well worth pouncing on.

I watched her, not because I wanted to gobble her up...but because I wanted to make sure nothing else emerged from the darkness to claim her instead.

She was in danger. She always was. From the moment of her birth, destiny had bound her to me. Now, I knew, it wasn't just her body I was tied to.

It was her soul.

For thousands of years, she'd lived and died for my love. Every woman I'd ever shared my bed with had been her, in some incarnation, in some scintillating form.

It all made sense now. More so than anything else ever had.

I didn't just have a taste for leggy, freckled redheads.

The only hunger I'd ever known had been for her, and her alone.

She locked the door behind her. *Good*. She hadn't always been so careful. Her friends' warnings must have finally gotten through.

My chest panged with a small regret—I wished I could've been the one to warn her myself. Then, I could've slept with my hat tilted down over my eyes in her doorway. Could've sat in the armchair of her room all night long, watching her dream.

Wondering if maybe, her memories weren't so far away after all. If maybe, she still dreamed of me.

I certainly dreamed of her.

But no—I had to keep my distance. The closer I was to her, the more danger she was in.

Leviathan's prophecy was known to us all now in full. Four Kings of Hell. Four fated mates. Four children of their unions.

Lucifer and Evie's little girl, Lily—a child of Heaven and Hell.

Abaddon and Bea's baby, Abbie—a child of Hell and Earth.

Moloch and Joan's Hazel, still stirring in the womb—a child of Earth and Heaven.

All that left was Ava and me.

Somehow, we were destined to have a child of Earth alone. I still didn't know how that was even going to be possible—but I suspected, based on Luke's, Don's and Lock's experiences, it wouldn't come without sacrifice.

Few things in our lives ever did.

Between these prophesized children, they held the power to change the world—or destroy it for good.

The wind picked up suddenly, sending a rogue gale toward Ava that sent her skirt flying up to her waist. As I admired the way her white lace panties hugged the round, firm curves of her ass, I smirked.

At least when it came to fulfilling my end of the prophecy—if it was ever safe to allow myself to breed her—I didn't have to worry about that *Earth alone* thing quite yet.

The way my cock went stiff at the sight of Ava's long legs and perky ass told me I wasn't in any danger of becoming human anytime soon.

No. Every dark desire to take her and claim her, mark her with my teeth and make her mine told me that in the depths of my soul, I was all

demon. Entirely a creature of Hell.

She straightened her skirt out and headed for her car.

Where are you going tonight, sweetheart? Not into the arms of some silly boy, I hoped.

Ava was a virgin still. She believed she was cursed to kill any man she lay with; maybe it was true. Either way, she was long overdue for a nice, hard fuck, and I was a hard man to kill.

Truth was, there wasn't a man in all the world who deserved her anyway. Not a one of them could give her the pleasures that I could.

If they thought differently, they were dead wrong.

Emphasis on dead.

I was watching over Ava to protect her from most evil forces of Hell, sure...

But if I needed to step in and kill a handsy boyfriend or two in the meantime, I wouldn't mind at all.

Even though she'd forgotten me. Even though I knew I had to stay away.

That didn't make her any less mine.

Maybe I was her curse: any man who tried to claim her before I could would certainly end up six feet under for his efforts.

They deserved to die if they thought they were ever going to be allowed to claim what was mine by right.

I had a plan: wait for her to take off in her little yellow VW Beetle, then take to the skies on my pitch-black wings and follow her wherever she went.

But Ava didn't get into her car. She walked past it, down toward the crossroads at the end of her driveway.

The hairs on the back of my neck bristled as I checked my pocket watch. Nearly three in the morning.

Something wasn't right.

At best, her behavior was strange. I'd been watching over her for more than year now. She never went on walks so late like this. Never alone, and never at such a wild hour of the night.

At worst...

There was something drawing her out into the darkness. Something beyond my reach and ken.

I wasn't about to stick around here and leave her on her lonesome.

If she wanted to go out tonight, she'd have a growling, vicious guard dog trailing right behind.

I pushed the branches before me aside and took a step out of the tree line into her yard. I'd follow her all the way to her destination, then all the way back home again.

Or, at least, that's what I'd intended to do.

But as soon as I moved, that bristling on the back of my neck turned to ice-cold needles up and down my spine.

Blue flames erupted all around me. My head was reeling as my world turned upside down, then plummeted into a tailspin.

I gritted my teeth and fought the sensation. There was something pulling me away, not on a physical level, but a cosmic one. Blue-hot strands of fate wound their way around my wrists, neck and waist. I strained hard with every muscle in my body against them—I wasn't an easy man to tie down.

But it didn't matter. The bindings were too tight and their pull was too strong.

I blinked and found myself somewhere else.

"Malacoda." A voice, rich and female, called out from the new darkness that surrounded me. "How glad I am to see you."

I tried to take a step forward, but found I couldn't. My boots were firmly rooted on the ground. The flames had died down and deepened into a smoldering pentagram etched into the grass at my feet.

One that I now stood in the center of. Trapped.

Fuck.

"Wish I could say the same, darlin'." I caught sight of a glimmering object in the grass and carefully crouched down to retrieve it. "But I can't see you at all. Why not step out of the shadows and show me your face?"

To summon me like this—to bind me to this place, wherever it was—whoever had cast this spell had done more than powerful magic.

They would've needed my blood.

The only demon in Hell that had my blood was my own mother. I didn't like the idea of Belial siding with Beelzebub, Mammon and Leviathan in the great battle that was yet to come.

But there was another who had my blood now.

Just one.

As I lifted Ava's mother's locket from the ground, it had obviously been placed there intentionally. A clever little trap.

I wasn't sure whether gaining the knowledge of who had set it should have left me even more worried or relieved.

Being bound to Earth by my own mother would have been an annoyance, but at least I probably could've talked my way out of it.

I'd always been her favorite son.

Ava's mother, though...

I had no idea how to bargain with her. No idea what she might want.

The darkness beyond the pentagram rustled. From it, a dozen figures emerged. They all wore hooded cloaks, flowing and dark.

Even though I couldn't see any of their faces, I knew every set of eyes among them was focused right on me.

"Hello, Mal." The tallest of the figures pulled back her hood as she approached me. I recognized her as Ava's mother right away. Same green eyes. Same red hair. "How kind of you to join us."

"Didn't have much of a choice, now did I?" I held the locket up by its chain so she could see it. "We left you this to save your life, you know. Dirty trick to use it against me instead."

"The world's ending, Mal." She clicked her tongue at me like I was a misbehaving schoolboy. What a laugh. She had no idea how exactly badly I could misbehave—not yet. "In the face of the apocalypse, you have to play dirty to get what you want."

"And what is it that *you* want?" I reached up and took my hat off. Pressed it to my heart. I was, in my own way, a gentleman, after all. I had manners enough to doff my hat in the presence of a woman—even if my own mother hadn't bothered to raise me right. Or at all. "More blood, I s'pose? A little demon ichor for you and your coven's dark designs?"

"Blood? In a way, yes." Ava's mother reached into her robes. A silver dagger flashed in the moonlight. "You've certainly got enough of it to spare."

I tracked the glint of her blade and chuckled. "Bleedin' me dry ain't gonna help you. Demon's blood's no good if the demon's dead."

Did she even have enough power to kill me? Maybe, I supposed. I was a King of Hell now. The last one left. The hellfire in my veins burned stronger than ever for it.

But Hell was a long way from Greenriver, and she already had me bound.

If she wanted me dead, I was sure she'd try her damndest.

She wouldn't like the pound of flesh I'd take in return for her efforts, though. No one ever did.

"I didn't summon you here to kill you, Mal."

"Golly," I deadpanned. "Ain't that a relief."

She moved closer, her dagger still clutched tight. "I called you here for your help."

I had to laugh at that. "Well, shit, sweetheart. If you wanted my help, you coulda just asked."

I'd given her my blood willingly already. If she knew to pair it with my name, then she'd known exactly who it came from.

Wasn't like I was being uncooperative.

I was in love with her daughter, after all. Anything Ava's people needed, I was more than happy to provide.

Though, admittedly, a little less now.

"I don't think you'd be too eager on giving me what I want, Mal." She walked a circle around me, tracing the outer edges of her pentagram. "If you were, you wouldn't have spent the last year lurking around outside my daughter's home."

Ah. So she knew about that, then. Supposed that's what I got for trying to save her life.

"Got me there." I held my hands up lazily. She was right. I'd been found out. "Does Ava know yet?"

"That a demon has been slinking around just beyond her doorstep?" Ava's mother shrugged. "She didn't. But she does now."

I wanted to swear, but bit my tongue.

Would've have been very polite.

Ava. All this time, I'd been keeping myself away to protect her.

But now that her mother had bound me here on Earth...

I had a bad feeling that I knew exactly where this was going.

Ava's mother was right.

I didn't like this at all.

"You want me to breed her." I clenched my jaw and shook my head. As much as I liked the idea of Ava's broad hips pinned down beneath mine

while I spilled my seed into her virgin womb, this wasn't exactly the way I'd imagined it. "Not gonna happen."

Ava deserved the chance to fall in love. To be courted and wooed, taken out, treated right. She deserved what I'd given her last time, before the angels had taken her memories away.

And she deserved it sometime when it was safer, after our allies had managed to put an end to anyone who'd try to control her once and for all.

"I admire your conviction, Mal. But I'm not sure you're taking your current situation fully into account." She gestured to my boots with the tip of her knife. "You're bound here until I release you. I'm not planning on doing that until you agree to my demands."

"If you know enough about the way this world works to summon and bind a King of Hell, then you know good and well you don't get to make *demands*," I reminded her. "Demons don't take orders. We make bargains. You woulda been better off just askin'."

"I'm aware of the rules, Mal. Do you really think I would have summoned you here if I didn't have something you wanted to offer in return?"

This was bullshit was what this was. The truth of the matter was I *did* want to breed Ava. Wanted her all to myself. Mine to claim. Mine to own.

Mine, and all mine. Forever. For good.

But not like this. Not now.

It would put her life in danger. Worse, it would endanger the life of any child we had together as well if they fell into Leviathan's hands.

"You're not gonna be able to offer me anything I want," I told her plainly. "The fact that you're aimin' to bring this child into the world now tells me you don't even know what's at stake."

"That's the thing, Mal." She reached out to me and patted my cheek. "I do. And so does she. In exchange for your cooperation, Ava is prepared to offer herself to you. As your bride." Slowly, Ava's mother's lips curled into a smile. "Don't try to tell me that's not something that you want."

I swallowed hard. She wasn't wrong.

All I wanted—all I'd ever wanted—was her. My sweet Ava. Love of my life—in this incarnation, and in every other.

But I wanted her under my terms. Under hers.

I wanted safe and happy and whole.

This...this was just more machination. A silly human trying to play around with the strands of fate.

“Or,” Ava’s mother continued, as though she could sense my reluctance, “I can leave you bound here like this. Who knows what evil forces might come along to collect you then—or, worse, come to collect *her*. You can’t really protect her if you stuck here where you stand, now can you?”

A low growl left my throat.

She had me there.

My hands weren’t exactly tied, but the rest of me certainly was.

“You’d give up your daughter. Your own flesh and blood...for this?” I wanted to spit. My good manners were quickly leaving me. This was fucked. “All this for a child?”

“Yes. A child.” She moved behind me and slipped the blade of her knife beneath my shirt. With a jerk of her wrist, she slit the shirt in two down my spine. The fabric was strong enough, but it tore with barely even a whisper. That little knife of hers was sharp—and so was she. “A child that will save the world.”

She spread my shirt, baring my back to the wind, and pressed her hand between my shoulder blades. I stiffened, snarling, but I couldn’t move away.

Warmth from Ava’s mother’s palm radiated through the muscles of my back. I realized what she was doing just a moment before she managed to do it.

My wings swelled up from beneath my skin. In a flap of black feathers, they unfurled.

One child born of Heaven and Hell. One of Heaven and Earth. One of Hell and Earth...

One of Earth, and Earth alone.

“You don’t want to do this,” I growled at her as she positioned her knife against the root of my left wing. “You don’t know what you’re fucking with here.”

“That’s sweet, Mal. But in fact...” She made the first cut and I hissed through clenched teeth. Down my back, I could feel the first warm trickle of blood begin to flow. “I think you’ll soon find that I do.”

With a cruel twist of her hand, she snapped my left wing away from my skin. I clenched my fists tighter, knuckles going white as my grunts of

pain turned into a sudden roar. As she moved to give my other wing the same treatment, my entire world flashed white.

As my vision narrowed to a pinprick, I shoved the pain away. I drew to my mind the only thought that could possibly make it bearable: Ava.

She was my world. My heart. My entire soul.

And now, whether I was ready or not, she was going to be my mate. My bride.

A child that can save the world. For Ava's sake, I hoped her mother was right.

Because if she was wrong...

There'd be more than just hell to pay.



Get The Demon King's Destiny



To save the world, I have to marry a demon . . .

My mother, who is a powerful witch, had a prophecy—I will marry Mal, one of the Kings of Hell, become pregnant, and our child will save the

earth. It's not exactly the wedding I dreamed of, but I'll do whatever it takes to save those I love.

Now she's bound Mal to earth and rendered him human so we can be together, and I'm starting to think that marrying a demon isn't as bad as it sounds. He's sinfully hot and it's sexy how he's so protective of me. Given the forces in heaven and hell aren't happy about the idea of our child, I think I'm going to need all the protection I can get...

Except there's one minor detail of the prophecy that I'm convinced is wrong—either way, my husband will die. I don't care what any damn prophecy says. Mal and I are fated. Deep in my soul, I know it. And we'll fight heaven and hell to be together...

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THE DEMON KING'S DESTINY

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FOREWORD

*“What if we still ride on, we two
With life for ever old yet new,
Changed not in kind but in degree,
The instant made eternity,—
And heaven just prove that I and she
Ride, ride together, for ever ride?”*

—Robert Browning
“The Last Ride Together”

PROLOGUE

MAL

They say when you find yourself in a hole, the first thing you oughta do is stop digging.

Maybe that's my problem, darlin'. You're my diamond in the rough. You're a treasure I just can't give up. My heart, my fire, my fortune in gold at the bottom of the Rio Grande—

My Ava.

No matter where I go or what I do, I don't reckon I could ever quit searching for you.

Your soul has lived a hundred lifetimes. Somehow, I've been lucky enough to find you in all of them.

We've loved. I've lost. You've been reborn for me to love again.

But now, it's looking like our luck has finally run out.

The last time you kissed me in this life of yours, it was the moment before angels came to take every memory of me out of your pretty little head. Humans and demons ain't meant to go fallin' in love, or so Heaven says.

You were taken away from me—but don't you think for a second that I ever let you get too far away.

All this time, I've been watching over you. Protecting you from harm. The angels in Heaven want you dead. The demons in Hell want to claim you for their own.

I won't let that happen, 'course.

You're mine, darlin'. You always have been. You always will be. Mine, and mine alone.

But wouldn't you know it—this time around, the most dangerous thing of all for you is me. My love is a rattlesnake in the brush, just waiting for the right time to strike.

I've been holding out for as long as I can—but there are other forces at work here. Powers that are beyond even my control.

If I don't have you, it'll kill me.

If I breed you, it'll bring about the end of the world itself.

And now...

Forgive me, Ava.

It looks like I may not have a choice.

AVA

The whole world was going to hell in a hand basket. I could tell, because tonight, I was getting married.

You might think that there are stranger signs of a rapidly approaching apocalypse than a woman saying her wedding vows—and you’d be right.

But not when that woman was *me*.

“Ava! Absolutely not. I won’t stand for it.” My oldest sister, Zara, frowned at me from the screen of my iPhone. “Is this like...some kind of joke?”

“What?” I asked as I lit the final white candle on my bedroom vanity. I shook the flame out of the match with a frown. If Zara was having last-minute reservations about my impending nuptials, they were showing up a *little* late. “What’s wrong?”

“Your *face*, hon.” Behind Zara, I could see a flurry of blankets, Barbie Dolls, GI Joes and rogue kitchen utensils being tossed around like a small hurricane had been set loose in her living room. “I thought I taught you better than—hey!” She turned over her shoulder, and I caught a glimpse of her redheaded triplets—the source of the chaos on her side of the call. “Knock it off!”

The chaos subsided—for the moment—as I leaned in to peer at the smaller window on my phone’s screen. I could see my own freckled face staring back, wide-eyed and plain.

It was nothing special, but it looked all right to me.

"I thought you were going to forbid me from going through with tonight," I admitted as I turned my gaze to my mirror, searching for whatever imperfection Zara was talking about. My green eyes weren't bloodshot or puffy from tears. I wasn't dribbling snot or looking any paler than usual. No dark circles from sleepless nights or last-minute stress breakouts of acne, either. "What's wrong with my face?"

"You're not wearing a lick of make-up, hon. Is that really how you want to look when Mom presents you to your big, bad de—"

"Don't say it," I warned her.

"Why not?"

"Because..." I sighed and grabbed a lipstick, then held it up to the camera for Zara's approval. She nodded, and I set about applying it to my lips. The color was bloody red. A little intense, given my red hair and snowy skin, but if there was ever an occasion for intense, it was definitely tonight. "I guess I'm still having a hard time wrapping my head around it myself. Saying it out loud...it makes it more real."

"It's about to be pretty real whether we say it out loud or not," Zara pointed out. She leaned back and arched an eyebrow. "Did you *want* me to tell you that you shouldn't go through with it?"

I blotted my lipstick on a folded-over tissue and considered it.

"No," I said after a moment. "I guess not. But..."

"You're nervous," Zara guessed.

"Not...nervous, exactly." Scared shitless with a side of tentatively horny was more like it—but I didn't dare say the H-word within earshot of my three little nieces. Some words were best left unsaid around tiny ears, right?

Words like *demon*.

Even *my* tiny ears weren't quite ready for that yet.

"You're gonna be fine," Zara assured me. "All you need is a little more war-paint. That lipstick is good, but..." Her lips curled into the same wicked grin of inspiration I was sure her Hollywood horror movie actors saw every time they sat down in her make-up chair. "Let's talk eyeshadow next. I'm thinking something...*smoky*."

By the time Zara had finished walking me through a personalized make-up tutorial, the triplets had started throwing their toys again. But Zara didn't seem to have noticed. At least, not yet.

“*There*,” she said with a pleased sigh as I put the finishing touches on my eyeliner. It was thick and dark, with wings wide enough to fly away on and sharp enough to slit a throat. “I don’t wanna alarm you, baby Aves, but you look hot as—”

“Don’t say it!” I yelped again.

“Hell,” Zara finished with a smirk.

I gulped and resisted the urge to lick my lips as I checked my reflection again.

She wasn’t wrong.

My eyes looked mysterious and sultry now. My lips were full and glossy, the color of wet blood. The candlelight in my bedroom and the glow of my phone screen caught the highlights on my cheekbones just right, and with the help of a little blush, my freckles actually looked elegant instead of childish and wild.

I looked like a completely different person. A version of myself that I couldn’t remember ever seeing before. Sensual. *Dangerous*.

I looked like someone who was actually cut out for I was about to do tonight.

“Thank you,” I whispered down to the phone. “Really.”

“It’s nothin’, Aves. Consider it my wedding present to you, if you want.” Zara waved my words away—not that she looked any less smug. She’d spent her entire career dolling up horror’s most gorgeous scream queens for their big close-ups—and now, I finally looked worthy of joining their ranks. “Feeling better?”

“A little,” I admitted. At least the irregular little flutter in my chest that I’d been getting on and off all week leading up to tonight hadn’t reared its ugly head since she’d distracted me with wrangling my mascara wand. “You were right—war-paint was *definitely* necessary.”

“It always is. Now, tell me all about this de—this *man* you’re supposed to be—*ouch!*” Zara winched as one of the flying Barbie Dolls whacked her in the side of the head. “*Girls—*”

“Sorry! We’re playing apple-clips!” Raina, the oldest of the triplets, pouted.

“Not anymore, you’re not.” Zara turned to give the triplets her sternest stare. “Or do I need to tell Grandma that you three have been misbehaving?”

“Not Grandma!” Ellie shrieked, eyes wide with horror as she dropped the teddy bear she’d been readying to launch. “Anything but that!”

“Please! We’ll be good! Promise!” Jessie added, holding her hands up in surrender.

Zara laughed as she turned back to me. “That always gets them. You’ve gotta admit—there are *some* benefits to Mom being a witch.”

“For you, maybe.” All six of my older sisters enjoyed the vein of magic that ran through our family without any of the repercussions. Drop-dead gorgeous good looks. Lightning-fast metabolisms. Rich, kind, handsome husbands and cool, lucrative careers. It had come to them all with such ease. But I was the youngest—a seventh daughter of a seventh daughter, just like my mother before me. Unfortunately, that meant I had to shoulder all of the family’s bad luck along with all of the good. “Um. What’s...*apple-clips*?”

“She means apocalypse,” Zara said with a wince. “It’s been all over the news. The kids have even started talking about it at school. Sounds like the rest of the world is finally catching on that something’s coming, I guess.”

“Oh,” I breathed. *Fuck.*

Well...*that* was a punch in the gut.

“All the better reason for you to slay it tonight, right?” Zara said, forcing another smile.

“Slay it,” I deadpanned. “Right.”

Slay.

Zara really did have a way with words.

Zara and I had barely finished saying our goodbyes before another call came in. I answered it as I ran a brush through my hair, desperately trying to untangle some of the unruly snarls of my curls.

“Oh, *Ava*,” my sister Isla said with disapproval in lieu of a greeting as my brush got caught in my waist-length locks. Behind her, the first beams of a Hong Kong sunrise were beginning to peek over the horizon.

“Is it a mess?” Tanya’s voice from the kitchen. I could hear her sizzling something up on the stove—probably Mom’s famous fried eggs in chili oil.

“It is,” Isla shouted back at her.

“I know, I know. The hair.” Isla was a hairdresser by trade. Tanya was a haute couture fashion model. They were both in China right now on a big photoshoot for a magazine. “What should I do with it?”

“Do you have any of Mom’s smoothing oil handy?” Isla asked.

“Ugh. Maybe.” I yanked open a drawer of my vanity and searched through the glass bottles inside for the saffron yellow one marked *Morgana Green’s Frizz-Be-Gone*. With some digging, I found it. It was still full. “Okay, yeah. But you know I don’t love using Mom’s concoctions...”

Every one of them was laced with powerful glamor magic. It always felt kind of underhanded. Like a dirty trick I was playing on everyone who saw me—since they wouldn’t really be seeing *me* at all.

“Well, get over it,” Isla suggested—unhelpfully.

“We’ve gone through like six bottles of the stuff a day over here.” Tanya slipped into the frame with two plates of sunny-side-up eggs, glossy red and flaked with chili. “There’s no shame in getting a little help from the Powers That Be—especially not tonight.”

“I’m not sure how helpful the Powers That Be really are.” Nonetheless, I uncorked the bottle and shook a generous amount of the oil into the palm of my hand. “At least, not in my case.”

“Poor Ava,” Isla tutted. “Plagued by prophecy.”

“You don’t realize how lucky you are,” Tanya said through a mouthful of egg, gesturing at me with her fork. “You got all of Mom’s magic *and* all of her attention. I’d kill to be, like, cosmically important for once.”

“Yeah, right.” I rubbed the oil between my palms, then raked it through my hair. The tangles of my curls gave way immediately. *Frizz-Be-Gone* indeed. “Because everyone wants to be doomed to marry a—” I gulped, set my jaw, and forced the word from my lips. “A demon.”

“I dunno. He might be hot,” Isla pointed out.

“He *must* be hot,” Tanya added. “Did Mom’s prophecy say anything about, I dunno. Smoldering good looks or a ten-inch cock, by chance?”

“You know it didn’t. *Seventh of Seventh, eyes of jade, hair of flame; bear the Earth child of Malacoda and make the Earth whole again.*” There were some other lines too—about becoming his bride and the dangers of the coming Apocalypse—but those hadn’t stuck with me quite as firmly as the ones concerning my fate.

I was the Seventh of Seventh. My green eyes and red hair made me the perfect vessel.

Whether I liked it or not.

“Malacoda...” Isla shrugged. “At least you know his name.”

“Bit of a mouthful if you want to moan it while he plows you, though,” Tanya said with a smirk. She traded her fork for her phone and tapped on it for a moment. “Google Images says he might be kind of hunky, though—if you’re into the tall, horned and completely shredded kind of thing.”

“I mean, who isn’t, right?” Isla said as Tanya held up her phone to the camera.

I leaned forward and squinted at the images she’d pulled up.

Hulking, red-skinned demons with ram’s horns wearing armor made of bones.

Huge men with leathery black bat-wings and giant, serrated swords dripping with blood.

A pair of glowing red eyes peering out of the darkness over a sinister skull-toothed grin.

I gulped and scooted back a little.

“He looks...scary,” I admitted. “That’s...not what I expected at all.”

Isla and Tanya shared a look.

“You mean you hadn’t googled him yet?” Isla asked.

“No, I did. I just...hadn’t thought to check for photos yet.” After all—the photos Tanya had pulled up were all drawings made by humans. Realistically speaking, how accurate could any of them be? “In Dante’s *Inferno*, it just says he’s the leader of twelve demons called the Malebranche. They torture con artists and seducers in the eighth circle of hell.”

“Then he’s met a few of my ex-boyfriends,” Tanya joked.

“And *all* of mine.” Isla laughed. “So at least he values honesty.”

I smoothed the last lingering drops of oil through my hair, which now fell into sleek ringlets all the way down to my ribs.

“Then he’s going to be disappointed when he meets me,” I mumbled. *Red eyes. Curved horns and black wings. That menacing smile*—like he was already preparing to drag me straight to hell. “I definitely don’t look like *this* every day.”

“Aves, you look *gorgeous*,” Tanya assured me. “With or without Mom’s bag of beauty tricks.”

“If you weren’t busy saving the world with your blessed womb, I’d say you should fly out here in the morning. We could use you for this shoot, you know,” Isla said.

“Sounds like fun, but...”

Tanya and Isla nodded with understanding.

“You’ve got other devils to dance with.” Tanya gave me a smile.

“Good luck, baby Aves,” Isla added with a wink. “Just try not to step on his hooves.”

Hooves. I didn’t know what to expect from Malacoda’s appearance yet, but I could definitely do without any of *those*.

After Isla and Tanya hung up, I checked the time. It was nearing eight o’clock—which meant I had a little under an hour to get into my dress, veil and shoes then rush to the sacred glade in Greenriver Forest where I’d be meeting my husband-to-be tonight.

The same glade where, a few moments after he was summoned, I’d become his bride.

I threw the dress on over my head. It was a long, flowy shift with a high neckline. Simple enough—and easy access, too.

I supposed that would come in handy for when Malacoda unsheathed his demonic talons and tore it off of me after we said our vows.

I was just about to put on my veil when my phone rang again. I’d heard from three of my six sisters already. Since the last three were all in New York together, I could guess at who was on the other end of the call long before I ran across the room to answer the call.

“Hey, Sonia,” I said, propping the phone up against my mirror.

“Aves! Happy wedding! But, um... *that’s* what you’re—” Sonia started as I went back across the room to get my veil and she caught sight of me in my dress.

“Wearing, yes,” I groaned. “I know, I know. You’re appalled, right?”

Sonia was a fashion designer with her own line, so I was hardly surprised to hear that she disapproved of my ensemble.

“Not *appalled* exactly,” Sonia corrected. “But you look like a virgin sacrifice. What gives?”

“I mean... I kind of am one. Aren’t I?” I grabbed my veil by its comb and shoved it into the hair at the back of my head. It didn’t really matter

“Still can’t believe you’ve held out for as long as you have.” Dana took hold of Sonia’s phone and shoved Sonia out of the way. At her side was Marie. They were both dressed in chic black cocktail dresses with intense, rainbow-colored eye make-up—their costumes for the launch party of Sonia’s new fashion line.

“That curse you were born with really screwed you over good, huh?” Marie teased.

“Before tonight, maybe.” The subject of my continued virginity had been a major pain in my ass for most of my life. I’d had boyfriends, of course—but I’d never made it past third base with any of them. I’d never dared. “Now, though...maybe it was a blessing in disguise. I don’t know. Is that bad to say?”

“At least you won’t have to worry about any awkward morning-after small-talk,” Dana said. “Kind of a shame, though—I bet demons make great post-bang breakfasts.”

“The curse never bothered Mom any,” Marie said. “Maybe when you’ve got magical powers, the trade-off is worth it.”

“Yeah, well, Mom slept with seven different dudes just to have us,” I reminded her. Seven *dudes* who were now all six feet under. “I don’t think killing men was ever any problem for her. I mean...didn’t that ever strike any of you as kind of...well. Evil?”

“Are you kidding? *They* were all evil, Aves,” Dana pointed out.

“She met my dad when he was out on bail for laundering all of that charity money,” said Marie. “Not exactly Nobel Prize material. And she ran into Dana’s while he was trying to find a hitchhiker to pick up and murder, for fuck’s sake.”

Dana laughed. “Guess she really gave him the ride of his life, huh?”

“Oh, stop it, you two. Go finish getting ready—we’ve gotta be out of here in like ten minutes, or traffic is gonna kill *us*.” Sonia reclaimed her phone and carried it away from Dana and Marie. “Look, Aves. Your husband-to-be is a demon, sweetie. Short of the Devil himself, that’s as evil as they come. I don’t think you have anything to be worried about.”

“But if all of our dads are evil...don’t you think that some of those sinister genes might have, like...passed on?” I asked.

“Maybe. Marie *did* go through that phase where she couldn’t stop shoplifting from Sephora...”

“Hey!” Marie shouted from out of frame. “I paid for all of it. I mean, *eventually*.”

“And Dana’s got parking tickets like you wouldn’t believe...”

“Yeah, okay,” Dana snapped. “*You* try to finding good parking in New York.”

“But evil isn’t hereditary, Aves,” Sonia continued. “Look at you! All you do is bake cookies and whisper flowers into bloom. Does that sound like evil to you?”

I sat down on my window seat and reached through the open window to the honeysuckle I had growing just outside. The flowers grew a little thicker and more fragrant at my touch—the only proof I’d ever had that I’d received any of Mom’s magic at all. As a seventh daughter of a seventh daughter, I was supposed to have untold arcane abilities. Bushes, trees, plants and herbs—they all flourished at my touch. The garden outside my cottage was lush and healthy. And it was true that the flowers that Mom sold at her shop lasted ages longer than they should have now that I was taking over the family business...

But beyond that, sometimes it felt like I didn’t have any witchy powers at all.

“I guess you’re right.” I placed my hand over my stomach and closed my eyes, breathing in the sweet scent of honeysuckle flowing in on the night breeze. “I just wish we could be sure.”

“You’re worried about this baby you’re supposed to be bringing into existence,” Sonia guessed.

“A little,” I admitted. “It’s already going to be half-demon. And since I’m cursed to be a killer—”

“You know that’s not how the curse works, Aves,” Sonia said gently. “Whatever happens tonight, you’re only doing what you have to. It’s not your fault. As for the baby...Mom had a vision that it would save the world, right?”

“Right, but—”

“Then you have nothing to worry about. Mom’s visions have never been wrong before. She’s always right, and everything always turns out okay in the end.”

I sighed. “I guess I’m just afraid that this one might be the exception that proves the rule.”

“Have there been any bad omens?” Sonia asked.

“Necklace chains snapping unexpectedly?” Marie suggested, shoving her way back into the frame.

“Black roosters crowing at midnight?” Dana added, appearing on Sonia’s other side.

“No,” I said. “Nothing like that.”

“Then my guess is, all you’re feeling right now are pre-wedding jitters,” Sonia said. “Mom should have let you invite your friends. It’d be easier with them there, don’t you think?”

“Probably, yeah.” But I didn’t want to even start to think about that right now. I moved to my closet, turning the phone around so Sonia could see into it. “Help me pick out something else to wear? I’ll show you what I’ve got.”

“Of course,” Sonia said. “We’re looking for something white—and not a nightgown.”

“It must be weird not having Joan and Bea there for your big day. Er... night,” Marie said as I shifted through dresses.

“You know how Mom is. Magic works best when only witches bear witness. She wouldn’t even let me invite any of you—and you’re family.” I pulled back a shimmery pearl-colored cocktail dress. “What about this?”

“Too informal,” said Sonia. “Keep digging.”

“Have you even told your friends?” Dana asked.

“How could I? Bea’s and Joan’s husbands are both demons. Or, I guess Joan’s is a fallen angel, but still.” I didn’t know what Bea’s husband, Don, or Joan’s husband, Lock, would think of what I was doing with my mother’s coven tonight. I couldn’t risk finding out. “If Mom’s prophecy is true, too much is at stake tonight to have any dissenting demons show up to crash it. I can’t tell them anything at all.”

“And you’re...okay with that?” asked Marie.

“I’m not,” I admitted. “Lying to my friends—even just by omission—it feels like shit.”

“But you have to do it anyway,” Sonia finished for me. “I get it, Aves. That really sucks.”

“Thanks.” I furrowed my brow as I kept searching my closet.

It was a small consolation, but at least Sonia understood.

“Hey...what about that piece from my fall collection last year?” Sonia changed the subject quickly. “Do you think you still have it?”

“The skirt with the crop top?” I dug a little deeper in the closet. “Are you sure it’s not too... I dunno.”

“Dated?” Marie asked with a snicker, and Sonia elbowed her in the ribs.

“I was gonna say too *elegant*,” I corrected her. Sonia’s clothes never really went out of season. She was a master of modern twists on timeless

classics. I knew exactly the outfit she was talking about. “You mean this one?”

I held up a circle skirt made of thick, expensive matte white material and a matching top with a square neckline. Both laced in the back with blue ribbon. The stitching was flawless. So was the gold metal work. Both pieces fit me like they were made for me.

Technically, they had been. I’d been Sonia’s model when she designed it. She’d sent me the end product as a thank you.

“Yes!” Sonia beamed. “That’s perfect. Not too elegant for you at all. It’s your wedding night, after all. You ought to show up in style.”

“Even if it’s, you know, not exactly your ideal,” Dana added. “You’re going to look gorgeous in that. If I still worked at the Greenriver Gazette, I’d do a full spread of you in the society pages, even.”

“I’m not sure that anything about tonight is meant for the society pages.” I put the phone down and pulled the shift dress off of my body, then tugged the top on in its place. Once I’d tightened the laces, my breasts were pushed up to impressive heights. I didn’t even need to look in the mirror to know it was a major improvement. “Especially not the ones in Greenriver.”

“It’s a wonder that those stodgy old farmers haven’t wised up to the fact that they’ve got witches in their woods yet,” Marie said with a laugh. “But hey—maybe someday. You should talk some of your honeysuckle into shaping itself into a wreath for you, Aves. It’ll really complete the look.”

“Good idea.”

I left the phone on an end table and reached through the window into the honeysuckle once more.

“Do you mind if I have a few sprigs?” I asked it. I knew how stupid that must have sounded, but I’d been talking to plants like this for my entire life. Sometimes, in their own way, they even talked back. “I need a wreath of flowers for my hair. It’s, um. It’s my wedding night.”

The bush bowed in the breeze like a nod. As my fingers snapped off a green, flowered length of it, the rest of the branch curled into a wreath of its own accord.

A wedding present from my favorite plant. I settled it on my head and went back to the phone just in time to see Sophia, Marie and Dana waving as they went out the door.

“Our car’s here, Aves—but you look great! Really.” Sophia blew me a kiss as Marie and Dana waved goodbye. “And you’re going to do great, too. Just remember—no matter what happens, we love you. Okay?”

“Of course,” I said with a thin smile. “I love you too.”

I clutched the phone to my chest as they hung up and closed my eyes for a moment, just to catch my breath. Thanks to my sisters, I knew I looked far better than I would have if I’d been left to my own devices. Perfect make-up. Perfect hair. Perfect dress.

If I’d been anyone else—if I’d been getting *married* to anyone else—it almost felt like this had the makings of a perfect wedding. A perfect night.

I was just in the process of putting my skirt on when my phone rang yet again.

I was popular tonight, apparently.

But when I saw who was calling now, my heart skipped a beat out of pure dread.

“Hello? Joan?” I pressed the phone between my shoulder and my ear as I shimmied into my skirt. When I laced it up in the back, its hem reached my ankles—just short enough that it would show off my shoes.

“Hey, Ava,” her voice came from the receiver. “Sorry I haven’t—”

“Oh, Joan,” I cut her off. “Don’t be silly. I know you’re busy. I’m glad you called.”

“It’s good to hear your voice,” Joan said. “How’s your mom doing?”

“Better, yeah.” In the flurry of preparations for the wedding, I’d almost forgotten how sick Mom had been just a few months ago. But everything had done a complete one-eighty since the last time Joan and I had spoken. “The chemo must be taking now. Either that or all the woo-woo stuff she’s doing on the side is finally working.”

“I’m glad to hear that.” Joan sounded beyond relieved. She’d always liked my mom—and my mom had always *adored* Joan. “And how are you?”

I laughed, clipped and high with nerves.

Even if I *could* tell Joan about what was happening tonight—where did I even begin?

“Busy, honestly. There’s, ah...an event tonight.” Not technically a lie. *Just pretty much the biggest event of my life. No big deal at all!* “I’m running around like a headless chicken trying to get ready for it.”

“An event, huh? Are you nervous or something? Hot date?”

“I wish I could get into it, but it’s...kind of a lot. My mom—” I moved to the end table and reached for an old photo of Bea, Joan and myself in a pretty antique frame. But as soon as my fingers wrapped around it, all I managed to do was knock it to the floor. The glass shattered on impact and my breath caught in my throat.

No bad omens. Well, that was definitely out the window now.

“Ah, crap! Broke my...perfume bottle,” I lied. Breaking the picture like that...it felt like a physical metaphor for breaking Bea’s and Joan’s trust by not telling them about tonight. I couldn’t bring myself to admit that to her any more than I could bring myself to set it right. “Ugh. It’s everywhere now, and I don’t really have time...”

“Oof. I’ll let you go then,” Joan said quickly, none the wiser to my deception. “We can talk when you’ve got more time. But, Ava...”

“Yeah?” I dropped to my knees to start collecting glass.

“Be careful out there, okay? Things have been...weird since Bea’s wedding. For all of us, you know.”

I snorted as I swept up the broken glass into the shell of the frame. “Yeah...yeah, you’re definitely right about that. But don’t worry. I may not be a badass like you, Joan, but I do know what I’m doing. Trust me, all right?”

“Of course I trust you,” Joan said. “Just, now, more than ever...don’t let your guard down. I want you to stay safe. That’s all.”

“I’ll do my best. And I hope you stay—fuck!” I hissed as a shard of the glass cut across my palm. Four drops of blood dripped down onto the photo.

One for me. One for Joan. One for Bea. And one for...

Huh.

Carefully, I pulled the picture out from under the glass. It was folded over, concealing a fourth person in the image that I must have forgotten somehow.

She was beautiful, with long, golden blonde hair, a cute snub nose and hooded blue eyes. She had her arm wrapped around my shoulder and was laughing with the rest of us.

We looked like we were all the best of friends. Like we were having the time of our lives.

The only problem: I had no idea who the hell this fourth woman was.

“Ava? You okay?”

Joan's voice called me back to the present. I glanced at the clock.

I had about fifteen minutes to haul my ass across the woods—easily a twenty-minute walk.

“Just cut myself on the glass. No big deal—but I gotta run.” *Literally*. I puckered my lips and sent a kiss through the phone. “Love you, Joan. Talk soon!”

A broken picture frame. The shattered glass. The cut on my hand. The drops of blood and the discovery of a woman who'd been hidden behind that frame all these years—one who I didn't remember ever meeting.

It was all definitely a bad omen. I knew that much, at least. But there was no time for worrying about any of that now, though.

I put the picture, the glass and the frame back on my bedside table and hurried to the place where I'd left my little leather boots by the door.

I had a demon to marry. A demon's child to conceive. And by the time it was all over...

I had a demon to kill as well.

AVA

The clearing was lit by torches around the edges and a bonfire in the center. A few feet away from the fire, a stone altar had been erected.

And between the fire and the altar...

That's where I stood to await my fate.

"Ava Green. Do you come here to the sacred glade of the Seventh Daughters of your own free will?" Neity, my mother's second-in-command, stood at the head of a circle shaped by the bodies of twelve cloaked women. The aforementioned Seventh Daughters.

My mother's coven, and my own.

I swallowed as I mulled Neity's question over.

No, I nearly said. *I most certainly don't.*

I wasn't here because I wanted to get married. I didn't want a husband. I didn't want a baby.

What I wanted was to take some time off from Mom's flower shop and drive my crappy little blue pick-up truck to Vermont for a couple of weeks. I wanted to hang out with Bea and Joan. Meet Bea's little girl and sing lullabies to the baby in Joan's belly.

I didn't want any of this at all.

I took a breath and nodded anyway.

"I do," I said. I held the breath in my chest and tried to make myself believe it.

There were things in life far more important than doing what I wanted.

Tonight, all I needed to focus on was doing what was right.

“Do you come here virginal, vestal, and unbound by the will of man?” Neity asked.

“I do,” I answered again.

Technically speaking, that wasn’t a lie. I might have fooled around a little before tonight, but all my exes were living.

I may have been my mother’s daughter, but I didn’t have it in me to become a killer.

At least, not before tonight.

As for *unbound by the will of man*—the only men I knew here in Greenriver were the elderly gentlemen who came into the flower shop to buy bouquets for their wives and Raph, the guy who’d purchased the old Miller farm last year.

I wasn’t *bound* by any of them at all.

“Are you prepared to give yourself to fate tonight,” Neity asked, spreading her arms wide and raising her palms up at her sides, “to secure the fate of the world for the greater good?”

“The greater good,” the other Seventh Daughters echoed. They stepped forward, closing their circle in all around me. “The greater good.”

The greater good. That was the *only* reason I was here tonight instead of playing peek-a-boo with Bea’s daughter in Vermont.

Bea. Abbie. Joan and her unborn child. Zara and her triplets. Isla and Tanya. Dana and Marie and Sonia. My mother, the coven members, the people of Greenriver...

They’d all suffer if I wasn’t able to go through with this.

If I couldn’t, pretty soon we’d all be dead.

“I am.” I gave Neity a final nod. “For the greater good.”

“Then kneel, Ava, daughter of Morgana.”

The leaves beneath me crinkled as I dropped down onto them.

“We come here tonight to fulfill the terms of a great prophecy.” Neity raised her hands up over her head. Her palms cupped the moonlight’s silvery glow. “As our world comes to an end, we honor Ava, who has offered herself as a vessel for the child who will save us all.”

“Ava!” The other Seventh Daughters threw their heads back and shouted my name to the darkened sky. “*Virginem matrem, salus terrae!* Ava!”

Neity stepped aside as, from the darkness beyond our circle, a new cloaked figure emerged.

“My daughter.” My mother pulled the hood of her cloak back as she crossed toward me. Her short red hair, only just now growing back from her chemo treatments, was shinier and thicker than I’d seen it in a long time. Her lips were curled in a gentle smile. “My Ava. I can’t tell you how proud of you I am.”

She cupped my cold cheeks in her warm hands and I closed my eyes.

My mother’s pride meant the world to me. Just a few months ago, when her cancer treatments stopped working, I’d been certain that I was going to lose her. But now that she was getting better, she looked ten years younger and stronger than ever.

She was going to live. We were *all* going to live.

All I had to do to make sure of that was get through tonight.

“Are you ready?” Mom asked me.

I let out a breath, the nodded.

“I am.”

“Good.” She pressed a thumb to my forehead, marking me with something warm and wet. I could only hope that it wasn’t blood. Then, she stepped back into her place at the head of our circle, just before the stone altar. “Then rise. Let’s begin.”

Slowly, I got to my feet. One of the coven members began to walk around the outside of our circle, hunched over and leaving a trail of salt behind her. Another approached my mom and placed a thick, black leather book in her hands. Our coven’s grimoire.

It was a book that would someday, as the daughter of the coven leader, belong to me.

The pages fluttered with the breeze as Mom cracked the book open and flipped to a page bookmarked by a black ribbon. She tilted her head back and shouted the name of my husband-to-be at the heavens—although, last I’d checked, Hell was below us. She might have had better luck shouting it at the ground.

“Malacoda!”

The other seventh daughters responded to her call by repeating the name in a low, eerie chant: “*Malacoda. Malacoda. Malacoda.*”

“*Fausta hac nocte sancto accersire te in hoc circulo!*” my mother read from the book. “*Ascendere volumus nobis oboedientes!*”

The wind picked up at her words, whipping her cloak around her. It tugged at the hem of my skirt and twisted the length of my veil.

I clutched my arms around myself and tried not to shiver.

Sonia might have chosen the perfect outfit for me this evening, but I wouldn't have minded if someone had thought to offer me a cloak as well.

The wind stirred the salt around the edges of the circle, but didn't break it. I held my breath as I looked down at the fire. The logs within it snapped and crackled violently. Its flames were quickly climbing to impressive heights.

Was that where my future husband would rise up from? From a fire here on Earth that looked like it was rapidly turning into the flames of Hell itself?

But no—the fire was just a fire. After a long moment, its flames began to recede.

Where would he come from, then?

Surely not the skies—not unless those drawings of his big, scary demonic batwings were actually true.

The chanting of the other seventh daughters was beginning to die down too. But unlike me, none of the other coven members were rubber-necking.

Their focus was entirely on my mother. Their faith in her was obvious. She'd never let them down.

At least, she hadn't yet.

As I hugged myself a little tighter, part of me wondered if Malacoda was going to show at all. If he was planning on making an appearance, he was certainly taking his sweet time about it.

Maybe he'd gotten cold hooves.

But as soon as that rogue thought slipped across my mind, there was a rustling in the darkness opposite the altar. Something large and inhuman snorted from the shadows.

And then, I heard it: *clip-clop. Clip-clop.*

Oh, for fuck's sake.

Hooves, indeed.

When the thing approaching us emerged from the shadows, revealing a man on horseback, I let out the breath I'd been holding with relief.

The horse was as dark as the night around us. Its saddle was made of black leather.

The man hunched astride it wore a black button-down that slumped strangely around his shoulders, a pair of black cowboy boots...and blue jeans.

And here I'd been, so concerned about how to dress for tonight.

My infernal husband-to-be couldn't even manage to put on a tux.

"Malacoda," my mother called out to him. "Do you approach this gathering of the Seventh Daughters honest, true, and of good will?"

Malacoda grunted as he swung himself off his saddle. It was a clumsy dismount. I quickly realized why.

It was the same reason his shirt hung off of him so strangely: it had been split down the back. His broad, well-muscled shoulders were marred by two thick wounds on either side of his spine. All the way down to the leather of his belt, his back was coated in blood, red and black.

I guessed now I knew why he'd taken so long getting here, too.

He must have come fresh from a fight.

"Yer the ones who called me here," he answered my mother through gritted teeth. He had a Southern drawl—the sound of tumbleweeds blowing across the red sands of a desert landscape. "Ya ask if my will is honest, true and good—what about yer own?"

"Answer the question, Malacoda," my mother said sternly as he tied his horse to a tree just outside the circle. It was the same voice she used to use on me when she caught me sneaking spoonfuls of honey from the pantry when I was a child.

"I'm not fixin' to hurt nobody, if that's what yer askin'." Malacoda finished tying off the horse's reins, then staggered toward the ring of salt around the outside of our circle. "I'm only here 'cause you called me here. If I wanted to do evil tonight, I woulda done it by now."

His boots crossed the ring of salt like it was nothing. I looked around, waiting for looks of shock to cross the other Seventh Daughters' faces and listening for a gasp or two—but no one reacted.

The salt was there for protection against evil forces. It was the first thing my mother had taught me about magic: always close off your space against ill will.

So either Malacoda was telling the truth...

Or the circle hadn't been made to keep him out.

It had been made to keep something—either him, or me, or I didn't know what—*in*.

Now that he was closer to the fire, at least I could start to make out the features of his face.

He was handsome. That much was immediately clear. He had a rugged jawline, full lips and a good nose—just a little bit crooked, like it had once been broken in a fight. His hair was brown, but the fire lit up stray streaks of red and gold laced through its tousled waves.

His face was ashen. His gaze was grim.

He didn't look like he'd just come from Hell.

He looked like he'd just been through it.

But at least, I was quick to note, there were no horns on his head or bones poking through his face. He was taller than me—maybe six-three or six-four—but while his size helped him cut an impressive figure, he didn't look anything like the evil demons in the pictures.

His appearance was...comforting. Like a picture of a cowboy anti-hero from the cover of an old romance novel, back from rustlin' cattle and hog-tying evil oil barons. *A stranger comes to town.*

All he was really missing were the blazing pistols and the hat.

"We have called you here tonight to complete a binding contract." Mom must have been satisfied with the answer he'd given her—either that, or she just didn't want to deal with any more of his back-sass. "Come before the altar and take the hand of your virgin bride."

Immediately, a blush started burning on the apples of my cheeks.

Virgin. A word that I'd accepted so long ago, it felt like it had become part of me.

Bride. A word that would seal my fate—and the fate of this swaggering, obviously injured demon as well.

I felt his gaze lock on me. He might have been injured, but those eyes of his were no less intense for it. My scalp tingled and the skin on my arms turned to gooseflesh under his stare.

It felt like being in the crosshairs of a sniper rifle.

I should have considered myself lucky that this man—even if he was a demon straight from hell—looked like he was in no condition to raise a gun.

He made his way over to me slowly. His eyes didn't stray.

"Ava," he said in a rasp as he came to my side. He lifted a hand toward me, like he was planning on running his fingers through my hair—then seemed to think better of it, lowering it to his side once more.

“How do you know my name?” The question jumped out of me before I could stop myself.

He chuckled, then turned his head to cough into his shoulder. “I’m a demon, ain’t I? I know all sorta things.”

“*Take the hand of your virgin bride,*” Mom repeated. She sounded annoyed.

I guessed this time, that was probably my fault.

Malacoda shrugged, then offered me his hand. He didn’t give Mom so much as a glance.

I looked down at his palm. It was big and ridged with calluses. There was something...strangely attractive about that.

At least, until I reminded myself that he’d probably gotten those calluses torturing souls in the eighth circle of hell. If they were real at all—it was entirely possible that he’d just put on this handsome human suit in an attempt to make himself more palatable to look at. Even those wounds of his might have just been part of his sinister act.

There was no telling which was true—and it didn’t matter, anyway.

By the time this night was over, I’d be pregnant, and he’d be dead.

I placed my hand in his. The tiny cut on my Mount of Venus—the one I’d gotten from that broken picture frame I’d left in my room back at home—stung as it found the salt of his skin.

“You mind if I lean on ya?” he asked, clasping my fingers tight. His skin was hot, but not hellfire-hot. More like...feverish. But his grip was strong. “Dunno if I’ll be able to stand on my own fer much longer if I don’t.”

I blinked in surprise.

Up close like this, he looked even more worse-for-wear than he had from afar. I could smell the blood on him, tangy and fresh.

If this wasn’t all just an act... What kind of trouble had he gotten into on his way here tonight? I was desperate to ask—but here in my mother’s presence, I didn’t dare.

“Of course you can. Here.” I put an arm around his waist and did my best to prop him up. He draped his arm free arm around my shoulder in return.

“Thank you.” He dipped his lips down and whispered the words into my ear. Every cell in my body rang like church bells at the sound.

I swallowed hard and nodded in response.

I didn't want to risk saying anything back to him. Mom was already impatient, and with the way my whole body was singing at his closeness, the sound of his voice...

I had no idea what kind of words might come out of my mouth.

The ceremony moved quickly. Quicker than I thought it would. Mom read more words from the grimoire. The Seventh Daughters chanted. The fire chewed on logs and twigs. The wind blew.

Honestly, I wasn't paying attention to a lot of it.

I was paying attention to *him*.

As he leaned on me, his weight was a little hard to shoulder at first, but it was manageable. As Mom droned on, that weight felt like less and less.

I glanced up at him and saw that some color was returning to his skin. His hand in mine didn't feel quite so feverish anymore. The scent of his blood was lessening as well.

By the time Mom produced a length of cloth to bind our hands with, Malacoda didn't need to lean on me anymore. He straightened to his full height—he was even taller than I'd initially thought—as Mom wrapped the cloth around our palms. It bit into my skin when she tightened it, then tied it off.

Now, we were bound together in body.

All that was left was binding our souls.

"We ask the Powers That Be to join the two who stand before me in holy union," Mom said, stepping back once more. "I need both of you to repeat after me: *Et consensu*."

"*Et consensu*," I whispered, quick and breathless. I couldn't get those words out of my mouth fast enough.

Malacoda had either been faking his injuries—or somehow, being close to me was actually *healing* him. Add to that the fact that my entire body felt like it was vibrating with some kind of bizarre subconscious excitement, and I was left with far too many strange vibes to count.

It was like my body *knew* that it was about to be...devirginated, so to speak.

Or that it knew it was about to kill the man who would take my virginity, more like.

Either way—I may have been born into a world of witchcraft and magic. I may have just consented to become the wife of a demon.

But even for me, this was getting a little too weird to stomach.

I looked up to Malacoda, waiting for his answer. As soon as he gave it, we'd be halfway done with this whole terrible affair.

Unfortunately, this was the *easy* half.

He stared back down at me for a long moment, then removed his arm from my shoulder. With his free hand, he brushed my hair behind my ear, then cupped my cheek.

I flinched at his touch, and his brow furrowed.

"You sure about that?" he asked. His voice was a low rumble.

"Of course I am," I said immediately. I glanced at my mother and found her frowning.

She obviously wasn't happy that Malacoda was going off script—but then again, he was a demon she'd just bound to this plane. What did she expect? He certainly hadn't been given time to practice his lines.

I didn't know why Malacoda cared whether I wanted this or not. Last I'd checked, demons weren't exactly concerned with consent. Were they?

But if that was what he wanted, fine.

I needed to be brave right now. Even if that meant just pretending to be.

Fake it 'til you make it, right?

"*Et consensu*," I said again, louder and more firmly this time.

Mal nodded, apparently appeased. "All right, then. *Et consensu*."

"Good." My mother snapped the grimoire closed and handed it to Neity. "It's done."

My gaze flicked over to her. *Is that all there is?* I wanted to ask. All that build-up...all that *worrying* I'd been doing—just for two words from each of us? Four from me, if you counted the time Malacoda had made me repeat myself.

Not even a *you may now kiss the bride*.

I didn't want to complain. It wasn't like Malacoda and I were longtime sweethearts or anything. We weren't even lovers. I'd only just met the guy. Our marriage was for one thing, and one thing only: to begin the conception of some kind of savior-child. At least, as far as I was concerned.

It just seemed like...

Like somehow, it wasn't enough.

But as I looked around, the coven was already breaking the circle and preparing to leave. Even my own mother had raised her hood back up over

her head and pulled a torch up out of the ground to light her way home.

“Mom...” I took a step forward, reaching out for her. But the strip of cloth that bound my hand to my new husband’s jerked me back—and the demon Malacoda certainly didn’t look like he was about to go chasing after the witch who’d summoned him here. He stood immovable in the same spot we’d said our vows.

My mother turned to look at me over her shoulder. The expression on her face was unreadable. Not even a smile of approval or a nod of encouragement.

“Do your duty, Ava,” she said to me. “We’ll meet you back at your cottage to tend to you when you’re done.”

In thirteen swishes of black cloaks, they all turned and left. The coven took their torches with them when they went. Only the dying bonfire before the altar and the chill of the night breeze remained in their wake.

The fire, the breeze, that horse that Malacoda had left tied up on the edge of the clearing...

Me...

And him.

He waited for the torchlight to disappear into the dark of the forest before he spoke: “Come here.”

I turned and blinked at him. I’d been married to the man for all of a few minutes, and already, he was issuing orders.

Maybe killing him wouldn’t be so bad after all.

He gave me a generous chance to obey him. Plenty of time to succumb to his will. I guessed, being a demon and all, he was probably used to his minions falling over themselves at his every command.

But I wasn’t a member of his Malebranche. I wasn’t some silly hussy he could order around, either.

I could tell that his patience with me had worn too thin when, in place of my obedience, he simply yanked me toward him by the hand that was still bound to his.

“I said, *c’mere*.”

I stumbled toward him. It wasn’t like I had a choice.

He may not have looked like the demons in those pictures that Tanya had pulled up, but he was still incredibly strong.

He caught me against his chest. It was hard with muscle, but beneath his shirt, I definitely felt flesh—not brimstone or bone.

He felt almost...*human*.

He didn't smell like blood at all anymore.

He smelled like leather, gunpowder and dark rum.

"Gotcha." Mal's body was warm as he held me. I lingered against his chest for only a second or two too long before I finally inched backward. His hand lingered on my waist. He didn't make any movement to withdraw it at all. "Careful, now."

Palm against palm, Mal guided my body until we'd traded places, then moved forward himself. He pushed me two steps back in return, until my thighs pressed against the edge of the stone altar.

It was like a dance. Almost. Something close enough, anyway.

Our first dance.

If we went through with this, it would be our last, too.

"Don't s'pose we'll be needing this anymore." He took his hand from my waist and raised our bound palms up to his mouth. I caught a flash of white teeth, complete with fang, just before he tore the strip of cloth that tied us together with them, freeing our hands.

The cloth came away for him like it was made of paper.

His teeth must have been incredibly sharp.

"Oh." I rubbed the place where the cloth had bit into the webbing of my thumb. "Thank you."

I guessed that explained why he'd needed me to *c'mere*.

"Yer welcome." He tucked the cloth into the pocket of his jeans.

That surprised me.

I didn't think demons cared too much about littering. He could have just as easily thrown it to the ground.

"Malacoda..." I whispered, bracing myself for what came next. His name felt right on my lips for some reason.

Maybe that was the way it always was, saying a man's name when you were his wife.

"Just Mal, darlin'." He encircled my waist with his hands. They were big enough, they nearly wrapped around me completely.

Those were the hands of the man that would claim my body tonight.

I took a breath as he lifted me up and placed me on the altar. His strength seemed to have returned in full force.

"Mal, then." I curled my fingers around the altar's rough stone edge and looked up at him.

He was tall enough to loom. Muscular. Classically handsome—far too handsome for someone like me. He looked like he'd stepped off the set of some old Hollywood Western. The kind where he'd shoot the head bandit, sweep the prettiest showgirl off her feet and onto the back of his horse, then ride off into the sunset with her.

It didn't feel like a trick, or a glamor, or even an artful disguise.

He looked *real*.

A ripple of shame passed over me. I only looked the way I did tonight because of my sisters' styling advice and my mother's magic.

He was only marrying me because my mother had called him here. Because, apparently, she hadn't left him with any other choice.

"Well? What is it, darlin'?" he asked, taking a step closer.

He lifted the hem of my skirt and pushed it up to my thighs, then took my knees in his hands. A flush bloomed across my chest as he spread my legs and moved between my thighs.

"I...I don't..." I furrowed my brow, searching for the right words to warn him with.

Every seventh daughter of a seventh daughter is cursed to kill any man she fucks. That was true, but the words were wrong.

Was it *fucking* that we'd be doing now? Sleeping together? Consummating our marriage?

Surely not *making love*.

"Ya don't what?" His presence between my thighs was impossible to ignore. Even as Mal spoke, I could feel my pussy getting just as hot as my chest felt. Beneath my breastbone, my heart fluttered along to the sound of his words.

"I..." My breathing was coming too fast. Too erratic.

Mal didn't look weak anymore. He didn't look injured, either. He looked strong. Formidable.

He looked like every bit of the demon I knew he truly was.

I knew I must have looked like a terrified little doe in the forest by comparison—a fragile, panicked creature staring up at the big, bad wolf.

"Use your words, Ava." Mal shook his head slowly as I continued to struggle with even syllables. "Ya don't have to do anything ya don't wanna do."

That was the thing, though.

He had no idea how wrong he was.

My mother had warned me that I'd have to marry Malacoda—*Mal*. She'd warned me that he was a demon. She'd warned me that I'd have to...to *make love* to him. To take his seed inside me. To bear his child.

But she hadn't warned me that he looked like *this*.

She hadn't warned me that he'd be so...

So *kind*.

I clenched my jaw and met Mal's eyes. They were dark blue, rimmed with thick auburn lashes. They had faint little wrinkles etched into their corners. Laugh lines.

Fuck.

He was a good man. Or, a good demon—if there was even such a thing. Or maybe, he was just a good liar.

A girl could hope...but staring into his eyes like this, I knew that hope was false.

He wasn't playing me.

He cared. He really did.

"I need to tell you—" I finally blurted out.

"No," he said. Another shake of his head. He pressed a finger to my lips, stopping the truth from spilling out of them. "Ya don't need to tell me nothin'. Nothin' but whether ya want this or not." He tilted his head to the side, moving his finger from my lips to my cheek. He stroked down my cheekbone with a fingertip, tracing the line of my bone structure. "Are ya havin' second thoughts?"

That was a laugh.

I didn't get to have reservations about this.

Not with the fate of the entire world on the line.

"I'm not having second thoughts," I insisted. "But you need to know—"

"No," Mal said again. His fingertip trailed down my jawline to my neck. "No more of that."

"But—"

This time, he cut me off with a look. It froze my words on my tongue and sent a shiver down my spine.

"Ava," he growled, shifting closer. His lips were so close to mine, I could feel the heat from his lungs. "Do you want me?"

The answer to that, at least, wasn't a lie.

An echo of our vows left my lips.

Et consensu. I consent.

“I do.”

His fingertip paused in its downward trajectory at the twin swells of my breasts. “And are ya ready for me?”

Another nod, this one less certain. My lips trembled. So did my voice. “I’m ready if you are.”

“Mm.” Another glimpse of Mal’s teeth flashed before me as he ran them over his lower lip. Sharp, fanged and white. “We’ll see about that.”

His eyes didn’t leave mine as his hand slipped beneath my skirt. His rough palm stroked up the delicate skin of my inner thigh until his fingers reached the lace of my panties.

My heart raced. A jolt of excitement throbbed through my pussy as he stroked there, too.

“You’re wet,” he said with a nod of approval. “But as for ready...”

Mal pressed a quick, firm kiss to my lips, catching me entirely off guard. Now, it wasn’t just my chest that was flushed.

With just that kiss, my entire body was on fire.

A dark smirk flickered across his lips as he pulled away, then dropped to his knees. “Not yet, you’re not.”

AVA

The wind picked up again, stirring goosebumps across my skin and stoking the fading flames of the bonfire to fresh heights.

The fire wasn't the only thing burning hotter now.

As Mal gripped my thighs, my pussy throbbed with a dull, stabbing heat unlike anything I'd ever felt before.

"Spread yer legs for me, darlin'. I wanna see what I own." Mal gave my thighs a squeeze, staring up at me with keen focus. He looked like he was tracking even the smallest shifts in my expression. Watching my every move.

I could have told him no then. If there was a time to stop him, this was it.

But I didn't want to.

I wanted whatever happened after my thighs were parted wide for him. I wanted whatever he planned to do to me once my body was his to take. His to control.

I hitched my skirt up to my waist, giving him a full view of the white lace panties I wore beneath it.

I spread my legs. Just like he'd asked.

"Mm. There's a good girl." Mal shifted closer, settling himself between my legs. He lowered his lips to my inner thigh and gave it a rough, wet kiss.

I panted as his teeth scraped against my sensitive skin.

Is that what I was now? A *good girl*?

The scrape of his teeth turned to a bite. The tender pain of it shivered through me and a moan escaped my lips—but still, I didn't stop him.

I only spread my legs wider.

Apparently, a good girl was *exactly* what I wanted to be.

"Your skin's so fuckin' soft..." Mal kissed his way up my thigh, nipping at me again when he reached the little valley at the lace edge of my panties.

I whimpered in response. *Whimpered*. I might have been a virgin, but I'd been with men like this before.

Not once had any of them brought me to make a sound like *that*.

I braced myself for Mal's next kiss. I was certain that he'd place it on the lace over my pussy, already damp with need.

But instead, Mal only breathed on it. A sharp, humid huff of air like a promise.

Fuck. Somehow, that made my pussy spasm far harder than it would have if he'd only just given me the kiss.

His gaze flicked up to mine. The blue of his eyes was dark and glimmering.

"I'll be back for that." He pressed his next kiss on my hip, skipping over my cunt entirely. "You're a goddamn buffet. It'd be a shame to waste it by eatin' dessert first."

He wound his hands around my back, easing me down onto the altar as he rose. I lay back on the cold, rough stone as he cradled me. He ran his tongue over the strip of pale, exposed skin between the waistband of my skirt and my top.

"Fuck," he swore. "Every inch of you I take tastes sweeter than the last."

Suddenly impatient, Mal curled his fingers around the neckline of my top.

I gasped. He was going to rip it—and as strong as he was, I knew it wouldn't be any problem for him to tear it completely apart.

"Wait," I breathed, shifting up and reaching behind me.

Mal arched an eyebrow, but pulled back slightly.

"It's a nice top," I explained, blushing. "It'd be a shame to ruin it."

"Mm. And here I was, thinkin' you wanted me to stop."

“No.” I sat up, my fingers scrambling to undo the laces as quickly as possible. “Whatever you do...please. Don’t stop.”

“Dangerous thing to ask a man like me.” Mal’s eyes trailed down to my breasts as I released the final lace. I pulled the fabric away slowly, then set it aside. “You’ve got a beautiful body, darlin’. It’d be a shame to ruin that, too.”

My heartbeat stuttered. If that was a threat or a promise—I couldn’t be sure.

“Is that what you’re planning on doing?” I asked. “Ruining me?”

“What if I am?” Mal took my breasts in his hands and gave them a squeeze. I made another whimper as he dragged his thumbs across the hard, sensitive peaks of my nipples, then brought one to his lips.

He ran his tongue around it in a circle. His mouth was slick and warm against the chill of the night all around. As he licked one, he pinched the other, rolling torturously between his finger and his thumb.

Then, he switched—and in that instant, I learned he wasn’t kidding about ruining me. With a sadistic precision, he sucked my nipple into his mouth and latched onto it with his teeth. *Hard*.

The pain was intense. The pain was perfect.

It wasn’t my body he was planning on ruining. At least, not *quite* yet.

No—he was planning on ruining *me*. My response to pleasure, to intensity, to being hurt—all of it, until ecstasy and pain were blurred together like the yellows in the petals of a sunflower as they shifted to orange. Like hot tears in the cold rain.

Overhead, thunder murmured as a thin mist began to drift down onto our bodies. A few seconds later, lightning cracked across the sky, splitting it open and bringing down a patter of rain.

The storm that the night had been promising since I left home this evening was finally rolling in—but if Mal was bothered by the weather, he certainly didn’t show it.

Apparently, my new husband wasn’t the kind of man who was dissuaded by getting a little wet.

He released my nipple and kissed his way back down my body, using his warm tongue to lap the raindrops from my skin. Tiny coos and sighs left my lips as he descended. I arched my back, then rolled my hips up to meet his mouth.

“That’s it,” Mal encouraged. A smirk flickered across his lips, then he dragged his teeth down to my thigh. “Show me what you want.”

I knew exactly what I wanted. I showed him like he’d asked, taking his hair into my hands and guiding his lips away from my thigh. Toward my cunt.

“Good girl.” Mal’s eyes met mine. “Now tell me.”

His breath was hot against the soft red hair over my pussy lips. Our humidities were mingling. My body was flushing so warm, I was half-surprised the rain wasn’t turning to steam when it hit my skin.

“I want to come,” I told him. The desperation in my voice surprised me. I wasn’t just telling him—in the breathy, hallowed notes of my tone, I was all but begging him.

“Mm. Bet you do.” Mal inched his lips closer to my pussy. My hips strained toward him in response. I needed those lips more than just *closer*. I needed them on my pussy, wrapped around my clit, sucking, slurping, vibrating as Mal moaned—

But instead of giving me what I was *clearly* just about dying for, Mal smirked and pinned my hips down against the altar.

“Mal!” I whined. “Please—I want—”

“I know, darlin’. I know exactly what you want now.” He pulled back and shifted up to fold his body over mine. His abs pressed against my cunt, mixing my honey with the wet rain on his skin. “And I’ll give it to ya. For a price.”

“A price?” This was a hell of a time to be negotiating—but I wasn’t exactly in a position to turn him down. My core was aching for release, and Mal didn’t strike me as the kind of man who did anything until he got *exactly* what he wanted first. “Anything. I’ll pay it. What do you want?”

“A kiss,” he said. “Kiss me and I’ll make your pussy purr so sweet, you won’t ever want another mouth on it again.”

I gulped. That sounded...delicious.

And dangerous, too.

If Mal and I took this any further than just oral, it’d be the last time we lay together at all—and if he was right, I’d spend the rest of my life longing for him.

The things I do to save the world...

“Okay,” I agreed. “A kiss.”

Carefully, I leaned into him and gave him a soft, quick peck on the lips.

There. Done.

Mal laughed as I pulled away.

“Now, that ain’t a kiss,” he drawled. “I know you can do better than that.”

I clenched my jaw. He was right, of course. I should have known better—Mal wasn’t going to let me off as easy as that.

I leaned in again. This time, I pressed my lips firmly to his. He moved back a fraction of an inch, and I followed him. I made my mouth soft for him and moved it over his lower lip, sucking it. When he started to kiss me back, I took a sharp breath then slipped my tongue into his mouth.

He raked his hands up my neck and into my hair as he met my tongue with his own. His taste was earthy and just the slightest bit sweet. His slickness, his heat...

I knew why he’d wanted me to kiss him now.

It only made me want him even more.

“There,” Mal whispered as he finally broke our kiss. “That’s more like it.”

His next kiss fell on my throat as he descended down my body again. He moved his hands over me, alternating between caressing my curves and squeezing them possessively until he was on his knees between my thighs once more.

When his hands caught up with him, he spread my legs apart like they were only in his way.

“Fuck, you’ve got a pretty cunt.” He spread my pussy open with his fingers, stroking up and down the inner lips until my honey was glistening on his fingertips. He admired how it looked in the moonlight and rain for a moment, then sucked them into his mouth.

As he savored me, he practically purred.

“Tasty one, too.” He dropped his nose to my inner thigh and nuzzled up it until his face was buried in my red curls.

I could feel him breathing in. Smelling me.

Another purr—then, a growl.

It was a scent he seemed to like.

I let out a cry as he finally gave me what I’d been aching for. He kissed my cunt exactly as passionately as I’d kissed his lips just moments before.

With the flat of his tongue, he licked my slit from bottom to top, then back down again. At my entrance, he made his tongue narrow and firm, then pumped it in and out of me nice and slow.

My fingers were in his hair again in an instant. This was exactly what I'd needed. Just the thing to help my body relax. The tension in my muscles was ebbing and flowing like a tide with every movement of his tongue. As he moaned, he sent a vibration through me. It panged sharp and searing into my core.

"Mal..." I moaned back to him, gripping his hair tighter. "Oh my god..."

"God ain't got nothin' to do with it," he assured me once he'd slipped his tongue back out of me once more. "No Almighty here, darlin'. Just you and me."

He took my clit next, sucking it between his lips—then between his teeth. He released it quickly, then reclaimed it all over again.

Now, that sharp pang of pleasure wasn't just shooting up into me—it was resonating. My heart thundered in my ears like a drum, and Mal matched every beat.

His fingers circled the slickness of my channel, then slid inside. He only used one at first, but once it was coated in my juices, he added another. The sensation was so intense, it was disorienting. I didn't know what to focus on—the way his fingers stroked my inner walls, or the way his tongue was flicking against my swollen bud.

The answer hit me as he found exactly the right rhythm: *both*.

I closed my eyes and lay back on the cold stone of the altar. There were no thoughts in my head. No reservations. No wonderings about what would happen next.

I was entirely in my body. Every touch, every kiss, every nibble and moan that Mal gave me, I felt like they were the only things in the entire world.

He was right. There was nothing here except for me—me and him.

My breaths grew ragged. My lungs struggled to keep up with the air they so desperately needed. My entire chest was burning, and it took me a second to realize that it wasn't air my body was screaming for.

It was release.

I was throbbing for him. My pussy clenched around his fingers in a crescendo as they found my G-spot. With every pulse, my clit pressed

harder against his tongue.

I moved my fingers from his hair to grip the altar instead. I needed something to ground myself on—and the altar gave me exactly the purchase I needed to grind my cunt more firmly against Mal’s lips as well.

My eyes rolled back. Even when I tried to bring them into focus, my lashes only fluttered in response. Every cell of my body was singing a satanic hallelujah—just for him.

Only for him.

It all climaxed into a sensation so explosive, my whole body spasmed and shuddered as I rode the swell. My toes curled. My jaw fell open in a low, intense moan that I could hardly believe actually came from *my* mouth. Pleasure rocketed through me, short-circuiting my nervous system then sinking deep into the marrow of my bones.

I felt Mal kiss his way up my body again, but the orgasm was still going. Even when he claimed my mouth again with his, I wasn’t sure that the thrill of coming for him was ever going to stop.

I clutched him tight to me and wrapped my legs around his waist. Through his jeans, I could feel his cock against my cunt. Hard. Thick. Throbbing right along with me.

Yes.

Fuck the curse. Fuck the purpose I’d been tasked with here tonight.

I wanted him. Not because I was supposed to. Not because I had to. Just because... I did. I wanted *him*.

For a blissful moment of selfishness, nothing else mattered but Mal’s body and how good it felt against my own.

“Fuck me,” I hissed as I shifted my lips to his ear. I bit his earlobe gently, then again—harder this time. I rubbed my face against his—I didn’t even know why. Maybe I wanted to feel his stubble rough up my own soft cheek. Maybe it was something more primal than that—like I was trying to get his scent on my skin. “Please, Mal. I need you. Fuck me now. Just like this.”

Mal tensed at my words and reached for his belt. *Yes. Yes!* My heart swelled in my chest and my pussy gushed with anticipation.

But then, to my despair, he pulled away.

“No, pretty thing,” he breathed down on me. “Not like this. Not tonight.”

“Why not?” My lips trembled as he released me. My thighs tightened around him with need, but he took them in his hands and untangled them from his hips.

“Yer my wife now, darlin’.” He smirked, but it looked a little forced. Like he was having a hard time holding himself back, too. “I’m gonna take my time with ya. Whether you like it or not.”

“But—”

“When I fuck you, you ain’t gonna flinch beforehand. No one’s gonna force ya. You’re going to come to me of your own free will—beg me, like you did just now—and then, I’m gonna put you to work.”

“But I *do* want you to fuck me now,” I insisted.

My words fell on deaf ears, though. Already, Mal was walking away.

“Yer tired, darlin’. You ain’t thinkin’ straight.” Mal stooped to the bucket of water that the Seventh Daughters had left next to the fire pit and began to wash himself with it. As he turned to splash the water up onto his back, I got another glimpse of the wounds I’d first noticed when he rode in tonight.

Less than an hour ago, they’d been open and raw—still bleeding. But already, they were starting to close over. Beginning to heal.

Well...good, then. Whatever his injuries were from, they obviously weren’t as serious as they’d initially seemed.

The only thing that would prove fatal to Mal tonight would be me.

“I want you, Mal.” As I found my feet again, my legs were complete jelly. I braced myself against the altar, then took a shaky step toward him. “I don’t care that I’m tired.”

“Fuckin’ witches.” It was like Mal hadn’t heard me at all. He’d already turned his attention back to the fire, which was still smoldering in spite of the rain. “Burn the entire forest down with shit like this.”

“Mal,” I called out again. I had to finish this. I couldn’t let him walk away without fulfilling the prophecy that would save the world. I didn’t want to face my mother afterward, either—not if all I had to report to her was the fact that I’d failed. “I said I don’t care that I’m tired.”

“I heard ya the first time, darlin’.” Mal dumped the rest of the bucket of water over the embers of the fire. It sizzled and smoked until it died for good. “Don’t matter, though. Even if you don’t care—I do.”

“But...” I balled up my fists and looked at him pleadingly. “That’s not fair!”

The second those words left my lips, I felt stupid for even thinking them—let alone saying them.

They were the words of a petulant child. Not the future mother of the savior of the world—just a spoiled brat throwing a tantrum because she didn't get her way.

The look Mal gave me in the moment after only made it worse: like he wanted to take me over his knee.

"Darlin'," he said, drying off with his ruined shirt as he moved toward me again. "You ain't always gonna get what ya want from me. Might as well come to terms with that now."

Suddenly, he grabbed my waist and tugged my body against his, fast and hard. My lips fell open in a gasp as I stumbled forward.

Mal stifled that gasp with a rough, passionate kiss. He crushed my lips beneath his and growled with pleasure as he slipped his tongue into my mouth.

I let out a whimper in return.

I could taste myself on his lips—the sweet-tart of apples, the soft floral of violets, salt and honey and eagerness for more.

"But when I do give ya what yer after," Mal purred against my lips as he pulled away. "It's gonna be all the sweeter for it."

With that, Mal curled one arm around my back and dropped his other beneath my still-shaking knees.

He swept me off my feet like I weighed nothing at all.

"Are you sure you should be carrying me? Aren't you still injured?" I asked as he carried me toward the tree line. "You looked like you weren't doing so hot when you first rode up."

"I'm feelin' better now," he drawled. The mud sucked at his boots as he moved through it. "Practically back to my old self."

I wanted to press him further about it, but I guessed it didn't matter. Mom had probably just summoned him in the middle of some kind of demon business. Maybe he'd been wrestling with hellhounds—or trying to punish a sinful soul who had finally decided to try their hand at fighting back.

Anyway, when Mal *did* finally decide to consummate our marriage, it wasn't like his newfound health would stick around for long.

Being in Mal's arms felt good. Right, even.

But I needed to be careful with him. Needed to make sure I didn't get too attached—or, really, attached at all.

When Mal finally took my virginity and gave me this savior child who was going to rescue the world from the upcoming apocalypse, he was still going to die.

He was going to die because of *me*.

And that was okay. I had to be okay with it.

He might have been good at making me come. He might have been handsome and kind—even sweet.

But he was still a demon—and his life was still part of the price I'd have to pay in order to save everyone that I loved.

"Nice horse," I said, trying to keep my mind off of the fact I was being carried by a dead-demon-walking. "What's its name?"

"This big dumb shithead?" Mal stopped as we neared it. He had to lean back as the horse turned its massive, dark head and nipped at Mal's shoulder. "I reckon this one's Geryon. He's a hell-steed—you can tell, on account of how big he is. That, and the fact that he likes to act like such a brainless dick."

"You *reckon* that's his name?" I arched an eyebrow as Geryon snorted indignantly. "I thought he was *your* horse."

"Nah. He just showed up. Guess he didn't want to miss the nuptials. Now—hold tight for a sec. Yer shiverin'." Mal put me back down on my feet next to Geryon and lifted the flap of one of his saddle bags. He found what he was looking for quickly—a thick woven blanket, folded up neatly inside.

As Mal unfurled the blanket and shook it out, something small and shiny flew from it. The little object made a dull *plunk!* as it landed in the mud at our feet.

"What was that?" I asked, teeth chattering. I wrapped my arms around myself and rubbed some warmth back into my shoulders as I peered down at the shimmer in the muck.

"Dunno." Mal wrapped the blanket around me first, then bent down to examine what had fallen out of it. "Huh..."

He plucked the object out of the mud and wiped it down on his jeans, then whistled low, obviously impressed.

"Well, then. Ain't that the damndest thing..." Mal beckoned me closer to him. "Gimme yer hand."

“Why?” I clutched the blanket around me with one set of fingers. My other hand, I held out to him—tentatively, though.

Technically speaking, he already had my hand, didn’t he? In marriage—he’d had it ever since my mother had bound us together with that strip of cloth.

“It’s a ring,” Mal explained, slipping it onto my finger. It was still a little muddy, but beneath the dark earth that clung to it, I spotted three large black diamonds set in a band of gold. “Whoever sent Geryon must’ve tucked it into the bag for ya.”

“Does someone in Hell know that we got married already?” I gulped. If they did, I was probably in trouble.

How long would it take for something like that to get back to Don or Lock? And once it did...

Joan and Bea would know that I hadn’t clued them in on my actions and my mother’s plans. I knew I’d tell them eventually. They were my best friends. There was no way I could keep it from them forever.

I’d just hoped that I’d have a little more time to wrap my head around all of this myself first.

“Hard to say, darlin’.” Mal shrugged. “But it looks right pretty on ya—and it fits perfect, don’t it?”

“It does,” I agreed, turning my hand back and forth so it could catch the light. “That only makes it weirder, though. Are you sure I should keep it?”

“‘Course ya should.” Mal put his hands on my waist and smiled down at me. There was something wistful about that smile—something happy and sad all at once that I couldn’t quite place. “A bride needs a ring. How else is everyone supposed to know yer mine?”

His. There it was—that distinction.

I was Mal’s bride now. His possession.

At least, he certainly seemed to think so.

He picked me up and placed me on Geryon’s back. Beneath me, the saddle was slick from the rain—but that was nothing in comparison to the wet heat that still radiated between my legs.

I hadn’t fulfilled my task tonight. I might have married Mal, just like my mother had wanted, but my womb was still empty of Mal’s seed.

Mal was still alive.

I’d lost my freedom, but not my virginity.

Mal hadn't lost his life—but he *had* managed to gain a wife.

It was Mal's horse beneath me, snorting and stamping as Mal mounted the saddle behind me.

Mal's blanket around my shoulders, covering me from the chill of the wind.

Mal's ring on my finger, its dark diamonds glimmering in the hazy moonlight.

Mal's forearm against my ribs, pulling my body to his.

"Lean back against me, darlin'," he purred in my ear. "Close your eyes. I've gotcha."

He was right. He did.

Mal's arms were wrapped around me, safe and tight. The exhausted, weakened shape he'd been in when he'd first arrived at the clearing tonight was completely undetectable now. Gone, just like the lightning from the sky. When he'd taken his place at my side before the altar, he'd needed to lean on me just to stay on his feet—but now, his chest was warm and firm against my back. His grip on Geryon's reins was steady. Strong.

I closed my eyes and turned my head to rest it against his neck, tucking myself beneath his chin. Our bodies swayed softly together as Mal brought Geryon to a walk.

I found myself drifting off to sleep as we ambled away into the night.

MAL

Just like that, she was mine again. Her ass bounced against my lap as we rode through the trees. I kept her held tight against me and felt the way her head went heavy against my chest while, little by little, she fell asleep.

My Ava. My soulmate. My greatest obsession—and if you asked Heaven, my greatest sin.

Now, my wife.

It had been years since I'd last held her like this. Years since she'd forgotten me—since she'd been forced to forget. I'd watched her from afar ever since. Every night, she'd been in my arms in all my dreams.

But watching from a distance and conjuring up her body in my sleep was a far cry from *this*. The weight of her exhausted body against mine was a comfort even my best-laid fantasies couldn't provide. The scent of her hair was in my nose: juniper, vanilla, pink peppercorn.

I nearly laughed. It was the scent of that oil her mother made to tame Ava's curls. She hated using the stuff. Must've wanted to make a good impression on me.

She'd succeeded.

She always did.

The moonlight dripped from the sky as we emerged from the forest and came upon the wooden fence that wrapped its way around Ava's property. I guided Geryon through a gap in it so we could amble up the driveway.

Her little cottage was dark at the other end of the driveway. Through the porchlight, I could just barely make out the shape of her little blue pick-up truck parked outside.

It wasn't the only thing outside Ava's home, though.

Gathered on her doorstep were the Seventh Daughters—no doubt ready to congratulate their virgin sacrifice.

I smiled as we rode toward them, like I was perfectly happy to see them.

The feeling wasn't mutual.

At the sight of me, they all looked either confused—or straight-up pissed.

Ava's mother broke away from the group and moved toward us with a scowl. "You're alive."

"Yep." I pulled back the reins and we stopped a few feet away from her. "I'm alive."

Morgana's gaze shifted from me to Ava. Her eyes went wide at the sight of her daughter sleeping against my chest.

"She's unconscious! And *half-naked*." Morgana rushed forward, obviously concerned. It was about time she felt some of that, after all she'd put Ava through tonight—though it was too little too late for it, and poorly placed at that. "What did you do to her?"

"About half of what we agreed I'd do." I swung myself down from the saddle, keeping hold of Ava so she didn't fall off. "Give or take."

"*Half*?"

"She ain't hurt, if that's what you're worried about. Just asleep. She dozed off on the ride here." I braced Ava's back with my hand and guided Geryon to the hitching post outside the cottage. The wood was gnarled and scarred with runes. It'd probably been there for just as long as Ava's family had lived here in Greenriver—hundreds of years. "If you're askin' if I fucked your daughter, the fact that I'm still livin' is your answer, ain't it?"

Morgana's eyes narrowed. "Ah. You knew about the curse, then."

"That's right." With Geryon tied off, I could finally pull Ava down. As I took her into my arms again, she stirred slightly, but didn't wake. She only made a small, sleepy noise and nuzzled against my chest. Cute. "S'pose it was part of your little plan to keep me in the dark about that, huh?"

“Of course it was. Not that it matters.” Morgana trotted alongside me as I carried Ava toward the cottage’s front door. “Where did you get the horse? He reeks like hellfire.”

“Geryon?” I glanced back at him. His dark head was already lowered, munching on grass at the base of the hitching post—happy as pie, and just as oblivious. “Dunno. He wandered up outta the woods after you left me bleedin’ out on the forest floor. Probably doesn’t know what he’s doin’ here himself. Never was all that bright.”

“That makes two of you, then,” Morgana snipped. “Neither of you should be here right now. Our agreement still stands, Mal.”

“Don’t know that I’d call it much of an agreement. You summoned me here with my own blood—”

“Blood you gave willingly.”

“And you know exactly what I gave it for.” I glanced over at her, noting how thick all that red hair of hers was looking these days. “How’s your health, Morgana?”

“Improving.” She didn’t even have the decency to blush. No shame, that woman. Not in the least.

“Well, I’m mighty glad to hear that.” I shoved my way through the cluster of other Seventh Daughters before the door. They didn’t look too eager to let me through—but I wasn’t about to let that stop me. “Now—where was I? Ah. Right. When I got here, you bound me to the earth beneath my feet, offered me your daughter’s hand in marriage knowing good and well that any man who beds her is gonna bite the bullet for it—then you went and lopped my wings off. Turned me human and told me that you weren’t gonna release me unless I kowtowed to your demands. That sound like much of an agreement to you?”

“You still went through with it,” Morgana said.

“Didn’t have much of a choice in the matter at that point.”

“You could have waited until one of your demon friends came looking for you.”

“And leave Ava unprotected all that time?” I shouldered past a particularly angry-looking steel-haired Seventh Daughter. She spat at my boots in return—real nice. “Not on my life.”

“Ava doesn’t need any protection. She’s not in any danger.”

“See, that’s where you and I differ, Morgana.” Finally, we reached the door. I turned to give Morgana a few parting words before I took Ava

inside. “She’s in more danger than you can imagine—especially after tonight.”

Angels, demons, and the whims of her own meddling mother, for starters.

We’d have our work cut out for us in the days to come—and not a lick of it would be helped by the fact that, thanks to Morgana, I didn’t have the powers of Hell in my arsenal anymore.

“Even if that *is* true—the Seventh Daughters and I would keep her safe.” Morgana stood at the head of her little coven. The Seventh Daughters gathered all around, doing their best to look menacing.

“From a danger you don’t even believe in? Sure. Right.” I nodded at the doorknob. “You mind openin’ that for me? My hands are a little full right now.”

“You can carry her in. Leave her in her bed.” Morgana pulled a key from the pocket of her cloak and slipped it into the lock. “*You* can sleep in the stable out back. We know what’s best for Ava—we’ll take care of her from here.”

“We’re in disagreement again, then. That ain’t gonna happen. I’m gonna take my wife to bed—and the rest of you are gonna fuck off.” As Morgana opened the door, I stepped forward to cross the threshold—and she stepped in front of me, blocking the way. I arched an eyebrow and snorted. “You gonna stop me from goin’ into my own home?”

“That’s Ava’s home. Not yours.”

“It’s ours.” I elbowed her aside. “She may be your daughter—but she’s my wife.”

“You’re going to have to consummate your marriage eventually, Malacoda,” Morgana warned from the doorway. “The prophecy will fulfill itself one way or another.”

“Never much liked self-fulfillin’ prophecies. Takes the fun out of things, don’t it?”

“You’re powerless, Mal,” she spat. “You’re human and hard-headed and helpless.”

“Ah. Well.” I turned to face her. “Play the hand you’re dealt, I reckon.”

“You don’t understand,” Morgana insisted. “You can’t fight fate.”

“You don’t think so??”

“I know.”

I smirked. “Watch me.”

I kicked the door closed right in her face, bringing our little conversation to an end.

Ava's cottage smelled just the way I remembered it. Fresh baked bread, spices, flowers...and her. It was a little messy—probably from all the running around she'd been doing to prepare for tonight—but in a lived in kind of way. Comfortable. Cozy.

Felt like home.

I carried her down the hall to her bedroom. I hadn't forgotten the way.

As I laid her down in the bed we'd shared so many years ago, I couldn't help but admire how sweet she looked when she was asleep. Her red hair was tangling up again—too wild for even Morgana's most powerful potions to tame for long. Her make-up was smudged and her skin carried the scent of smoke from the fire—but she was still the prettiest damn thing I'd ever seen.

Always had been.

Always would be.

I slipped her boots off and pulled the covers over her, then took a wet washcloth from the bathroom to wipe her face clean. As I removed her eyeshadow and lipstick, she only got prettier.

The freckles across her cheeks and the little smile that played on her lips as she rested were more beautiful than any face paint she'd bought in some store.

When she was clean, I tucked her in nice and tight, then leaned over to press a kiss to her cheek.

"I love you, Ava." My heart thudded, happy and strong, as I whispered the words into the shell of her ear. "Always have, always—"

"Mal?" she murmured.

Her dark, thick lashes fluttered as she stirred.

"Hey there, darlin'." I kept my voice low and hushed. It'd been a long night for her. She deserved a chance to get some shut-eye. "How're you feelin'?"

"Sleepy." She cuddled deeper into her pillow, frowning slightly. "What happened? Where..."

"You're in your bed. Fell asleep on the ride home."

"Oh." She nodded like this answer pleased her and rolled over, glancing out the window. "Is Geryon okay?"

I laughed. She'd only just met the mangy old nag—but already, I could tell she was falling for the dumb bastard. "Geryon's fine. I've got him tied out up front."

"Mm. Good." Ava's eyelids looked heavy as she shifted her gaze to me. "And are you okay?"

I smoothed her hair away from her face and smiled down at her. "'Course I am."

"Are you sure?" Her brow furrowed as she reached for my shoulder. Reached—but didn't touch. "When you first showed up tonight, you looked...injured. Your back..."

"My back's fine. It'll heal." I patted her head. She was sweet for worrying, but the truth of it was, the second I'd gotten close enough to touch her tonight, every ache in my body had faded away. "Stop yer worryin' and get some rest, all right? I'll be back in a little while."

Her lips fell into a soft little pout. "Where are you going?"

"Got some things to take care of real quick." I straightened and backed away. Had to force myself to. If I'd lingered there any longer, I wouldn't have been able to leave at all.

"And you'll be back when you're done?" she asked, her voice small and gently pleading.

I winked at her. "I will. Couldn't leave you if I tried."

Then, I turned and headed for the door.

Outside, I was faced with a new dilemma. I needed to contact Lucifer, Abaddon and Moloch to let them know what had happened tonight—but without my demonic powers, I couldn't exactly summon hellfire to speak to them through.

Luckily, Ava's phone had been in her pocket when I tucked her into bed.

Geryon stamped his foot and gave me a look of pure judgment as I pulled the phone out.

"She's my wife," I reminded him as I pulled up the lock screen. "You can keep your opinions to yourself, buddy—or I'll make ya into glue."

Geryon stared at me for a second longer, then went back to munching grass.

I didn't have the first notion of how to go about making glue, of course—but at least that shut him up.

Another stroke of luck—Ava had never bothered to change her lock code. It was the same as it had been before she'd forgotten me—the shape of an old rune that meant *destiny*.

Funny how fate always found little ways to slip into our lives like that.

“Ava?” Don picked up his phone on the third ring after I dialed him up. “It’s late—are you okay?”

“It’s Mal,” I corrected him. “And, ah...not really.”

“You can say that again.” Already, Don sounded pissed. I supposed he had every right to be—I wasn’t supposed to be fraternizing with Ava at all. Least of all running up her phone bill. “Why are you calling me, Mal? You could have summoned—”

“No, I couldn’t have.” I pressed the phone between my shoulder and ear as I walked to Geryon, smoothing down his mane while he ate. “I’m outside Ava’s place in Greenriver. Mind headin’ over here so we can talk proper?”

“It sounds like I don’t have much of a choice.” Don sighed. “I’ll use the Abyss. Be there shortly.”

“See ya then.” I hung up the phone, then untied Geryon from the hitching post. “C’mon, dogmeat. Let’s see what shape the stables are in.”

They weren’t as bad as they could have been, as it turned out. A little dilapidated and out of use, but all that could be fixed. I put Geryon in the sturdiest-looking stall, then closed him in to go search for some straw to bed him down with.

As soon as I turned, I nearly walked right into a long, thin slit that had been sliced through the air. A cut in the fabric of reality itself.

A set of hands pushed through the slit, spreading it apart—and Don’s face appeared, black and white and gray. The colorless shades of his domain, the Abyss.

“I’m going to guess from the fact that you’re not wearing a shirt that you’ve finished doing something you’re not supposed to.” Don shoved me aside as he stepped out of the Abyss. Slowly, the color returned to his body again.

“Well, I’m gonna guess from the fact that you’ve got mashed banana on *your* shirt that you only look so grumpy because I interrupted snack time.” I flicked the banana away from Don’s shoulder. “How’s Abbie?”

“Messier than I realized,” Don said with a sigh. “So. How angry am I going to be when you explain yourself?”

“Pretty angry,” I admitted. “But not at me. Ain’t *my* fault.”

Don pinched the bridge of his nose between his fingers, then nodded. “All right. Then I suppose you’d better start at the beginning.”

I shrugged—where the hell else would I begin?—then set to it.

I spilled it all. The clearing in the forest that Ava’s mother had summoned me to. Being bound to the earth, unable to move. The deal she’d made with me: stay bound right there for as long as she pleased, unable to protect Ava or even call for help—or give her what she wanted.

For me to take Ava’s hand in marriage. For me to get her pregnant.

Exactly what I wasn’t supposed to do.

“Well...that’s certainly a detour from our plans,” Don said with a grimace.

“Detour? Ava’s mother’s taken a stick of lit dynamite to them, you mean.”

“You’re not wrong. What are our options now?”

“We keep this as quiet as we can,” I said. “If the angels realize Ava and I are married—”

“They’ll put a target on her back as soon as they find out. What about Leviathan?”

I scowled at the mention of his name. Evil old bastard. He was the leader of a rogue group of fallen angels who wanted to fulfill an ancient prophecy that would end the Earth. A prophecy that, unfortunately, Ava and I were a part of.

She was undoubtedly his next target—and he was exactly what I was so desperate to protect her from.

“Best if he don’t realize either,” I said. “I don’t want a word of this gettin’ to Hell.”

“That will be difficult. If you’re human...the throne will be empty,” Don pointed out.

“Better fill it quick, then.”

“Easier said than done. Lucifer and Moloch are both angels again...”

“Which means you might have to keep it warm for me for a while.” I clapped him on the shoulder. “Until I figure out what to do next. Once ya’ve got that taken care of, I’ll need ya to call the Malebranche for me as well. You can probably find them out in West Hollywood somewhere, raisin’ hell.” Last I’d heard from the band of demons I led, they’d been taking care of my business out in Tinseltown while I camped out here in

Greenriver. They wouldn't be happy that I was calling for them to stop making trouble for producers and chasing down starlets—but right now, I needed them here more. "They can patrol the property. I don't want anyone coming in or out of here without us knowing about it."

"That's a tall list of demands, Mal." Don rolled his eyes, but nodded nonetheless. "You're lucky we're blood."

"Ain't nothin' lucky about this."

"True. Anything else?"

"Warn the others," I said. "Bea, Luke and Evie, Joan and Lock—they all deserve to know the world of trouble I just got us into."

Idiot. It was a word I'd been kicking around in my head ever since I'd found myself summoned to Morgana's binding circle tonight. Under any other circumstances, I would've been clickin' my heels and firing pistols into the air for joy at the chance to finally marry Ava.

But this wasn't a marriage. This was a fucking machination. One which, if we weren't careful about our next moves, might end us all.

"Shoulda never given her that blood," I muttered beneath my breath.

"Mal..." Slowly, Don shook his head. "I'm not happy about this—any of it. Believe me. But it isn't your fault. You spilled that blood Ava's mother used to bind you for a good cause. It's not your fault she took advantage of that."

"I shoulda known better. That woman would take advantage of the Almighty Himself if she thought it was in her best interests." I laughed humorlessly and tucked my hands into my pockets. "No good deed, right?"

"Nothing to be done about it now. Except..." Don glanced at the porchlight of Ava's cottage across the yard. "We do still need to find a way to get you out of this deal Ava's mother ensnared you in. You know that you and Ava can't really conceive a child, don't you?"

"Course I do," I grumbled. I didn't need him to remind me. Didn't need anyone—it was rarely far from my mind how bad things would get if I ever got what I wanted. "I made one mistake, Don. Didn't get kicked in the head by a mule or nothin'. If I breed her, we jumpstart the apocalypse. Not about to go endin' all of humanity over gettin' my dick wet. Not that I'd survive the encounter anyway."

"What do you mean, you wouldn't survive? Ava's a witch, Mal. Not a black widow. I highly doubt she's about to go unhinging her jaw and biting

your head off for sleeping with her. At least..." Don laughed soundlessly. "Not if you do it properly."

"Ain't no other way to do it. But...she's got a curse on her. Passed down from seventh daughter to seventh daughter throughout the generations. Every man who beds one of the Green witches will find himself dead for his troubles." Including me. *Especially* me.

"Seems like something like that would make it difficult to produce more seventh daughters," Don pointed out.

"You'd think so—but Ava's mother certainly had no qualms against it." Nor had Ava's grandmother—or great-grandmother. The Greens were the longest unbroken line of witches west of the Atlantic. Maybe even in the world.

Don arched an eyebrow. "Does Ava?"

"Hard to say. She used to, but..." I bit the inside of my cheek, then spat into the dirt. I'd been doing my best to bury my feelings about this—but now that Don had asked, it was harder to hide them away. "She begged me to bed her tonight. Tried to warn me about the curse at first, but... In the end, she didn't seem to have really cared that fuckin' her would've put me six feet under. I loved her, and she wanted me dead. Fancy that."

"She doesn't remember what the two of you used to have," Don reminded me. "Things have changed a lot since she lost her memories. For all of us."

"That they have," I agreed. "You reckon you can find me a way out of it?"

"I'll look into it. But that's secondary to preventing the conception of any children between the two of you in the first place right now." Don gave me a stern look. "Assuming that you're able to control yourself around her in the meantime."

"Morgana turned me into a man, Don. Not a fuckin' jackass. I want Ava. I'd die for her. But not like that—and not knowin' that I'd end the world for my troubles, to boot."

"In that case...good luck." Don gave me a stiff smile that didn't reach his eyes. "And congratulations again on your marriage. Mother will be thrilled."

I snorted.

He was probably right.

AVA

S nuggled comfortably in my bed, I drifted in and out of sleep for a while. My body was spent. It wanted to rest. But my mind wasn't having any of that.

Too much had happened tonight to process—and besides, I still had the scent of smoke on my skin.

Smoke...and something far sweeter.

Beneath my nose, I could still smell the lingering scent of my honey on my lips. Left there from Mal's kiss after he'd made me come.

No—there was no way I was going to be able to go to sleep smelling like *that*. If I did, I knew I'd be tossing and turning all night, replaying that moment on the altar over and over again in my dreams.

I got up and moved to the shower, unwrapping myself from the blanket Mal had tucked around me on the way. It was a beautiful creation. Soft and heavy, woven with a red and blue Navajo print.

I folded it carefully and draped it over the back of the chair at my vanity, then slipped into the bathroom.

Maybe a little soap and steam would help me make sense of everything that had transpired tonight.

A shower—that was what I needed.

Or at least, I hoped it was.

Once I was clean, I needed the world to feel like it was a little more simple again.

But even when I'd washed all of Mom's smoothing oil from my hair and scrubbed the scent of flames and wet pussy away from my body, I was still having a hard time wrangling my own thoughts.

Mal. Our marriage. The way he'd appeared so weak when he'd arrived at the altar, only to grow so strong by the time we left it.

Had it been our marriage that had strengthened him?

That seemed silly—but the idea that going down on me had healed him was even sillier.

I might have been a witch, sure. But last I'd checked, men weren't healed by making witches orgasm.

Or demons, for that matter.

But Mal's miraculous recovery was far from the only thing that had happened tonight that just didn't make sense.

I finished drying off, then stepped back out into my bedroom once more. In front of my mirror, I looked over my nude body and shifted my wonderings to something more important:

Why hadn't Mal wanted to fuck me earlier?

I wanted to say that I was hurt he hadn't been interested in sex—but of course, that wasn't it. Mal had kissed me. He'd gone down on me. He'd made love to my pussy with his lips, bringing me to orgasm with a triumphant enthusiasm that led me to believe it wasn't lack of desire that was the problem.

I had broad hips, a small waist, long legs and firm, perky tits. I wasn't built like a supermodel, exactly—my body still had the same silvery stretch marks and cellulite that everyone's did.

But it was a pretty good body, all things considered. Mal had certainly seemed to enjoy it.

So what had stopped him? Did he really just want to take his time with me?

I cupped my breasts in my hands, pushing them up a little higher, then let them go with a sigh.

He was an evil, depraved demon, I supposed.

Maybe he just got off on denying me. Maybe refusing me when I begged for him was just how he got his kicks.

As I continued to muse and gaze into my reflection in mirror, over my shoulder I saw Mal reenter the room. He was still shirtless. Still gorgeous.

And once again, he was staring.

“Hell of a view to come home to,” he drawled, adding a low whistle for punctuation.

Yes—I supposed it probably was.

My hand shot out for my towel so I could cover myself with it, but I hesitated as my fingers curled around its softness.

Did I *want* to cover myself up right now? I needed Mal to finish consummating our marriage, after all.

I needed him to fuck me.

Being naked seemed to be the fastest way to convince him to finish this. The sooner we did this, the better.

Anyway—covering myself up for him didn’t really matter.

After he’d ravished me on the altar...my body was nothing he hadn’t seen before.

“What’s goin’ through that pretty head of yours?” Mal asked as he moved behind me, stirring me from my thoughts. “Can practically see the wheels turnin’ in yer brain.”

He pressed his body close to mine and wrapped his arms around my waist, holding me close. My skin was still warm from the heat of the shower. His chest and abs were pleasantly cool against my back by contrast, slightly chilled from the night breeze outside.

“I was just wondering why you didn’t want fuck me tonight,” I admitted. That was more brazen than I normally would have been—but these were drastic times. Drastic measures only made sense.

He laughed as he smoothed his palms over my ribs. His hands, rough. My skin, delicate and soft and far too happy to feel his touch. “Never said I didn’t want to.”

As he shifted his hips closer to me, I could tell he wasn’t lying.

Through his jeans, I could feel something hard and stiff pressing against the small of my back. His cock. Even without looking at it, I could feel that it was massive and thick.

He wanted me.

“Then why didn’t you?” I blushed and clenched my thighs together. My pussy felt like it was blushing as well. My nipples went stiff as he moved his hands to my breasts, rubbing his thumbs over their peaks. There was no hiding it. I wanted him, too. “I asked you to. Several times. And forgive me if I’m wrong but...” I popped up on the tips of my toes and

arched my back. Now, his stiff cock was pressed up against my ass. “I think you might even want to.”

“Ya think?” Mal snorted. “But here’s the first thing you need to learn about me, darlin’.” Mal turned me around to face him. His blue eyes were stern and serious. Dismissive of my little attempted seduction. “I don’t like bein’ told what to do.”

“By...me? Because I wasn’t telling.” My blush deepened as he shifted his hands down to cup my ass. “I was practically begging.”

I was about three seconds away from begging him again right now, in fact.

“By your mother, darlin’. She twisted my arm into this whole mess.” Mal gave my ass a firm little smack. When I whimpered in response, he smirked slightly. “Never said it had anything to do with not wantin’ you.”

“Oh.” I rubbed my ass as he separated from me, backing away. It wasn’t that his little love tap had hurt. If anything, it had felt...kind of delicious. A little burst of not-quite-pleasure, not-quite-pain that made something leap up in my stomach and made my pussy clench greedily. “Well...that’s good, then. I mean...I get it. You’re a demon. You probably don’t like the idea of being tied down.”

“I’m not opposed to the idea if you’re willing to go tit for tat.” Mal’s belt buckle clanked against his thigh as he loosed it.

My eyebrows shot up in surprise—and my jaw dropped a little too.

Was *that* how he wanted me? All tied up—bound and gagged so he could do whatever he pleased with me?

I wasn’t surprised that a demon like Mal might be into that kind of thing, of course.

No—I was surprised at how much *I* liked that idea too.

“Not opposed to being your husband, either,” Mal continued as I tried—and failed—to compose myself enough to respond. “You’re a pretty thing, Ava. Soft and sweet.” He ran his thumb across his lower lip. I could practically see it in his eyes—he wasn’t talking about my disposition.

He was talking about my cunt.

Slowly, I took a step forward.

This was my moment. My opening. My chance.

Mal wanted me. I wanted him. My mother was nowhere around now—and we weren’t out in the dark on top of an altar, either.

We were here in my room. Together. Alone. I was undressed already. Mal was halfway there.

“I could be sweet to you in all sorts of ways,” I whispered, closing the gap between us again. I took the button of his jeans and slipped it from its hole. As I took Mal’s zipper between my fingers, I heard him inhale, sharp and fast.

“That so?” he growled, tensing up.

I didn’t blame him. My body was tense, too. I wasn’t worried about losing my virginity to Mal. I’d waited a long time for this moment—even if I’d never imagined it *quite* like this.

No, my only worry now was what would happen...*after*.

I was surprised how much I actually liked Mal. He wasn’t the demon I’d expected. He’d been kind to me so far. Gentle, even.

If I wasn’t careful, it was easy to forget that he was a demon at all.

I ain’t a good man, he’d told me back in the forest. I believed it. I had to.

If I didn’t, it was going to be so much harder to do what I had to next.

“I’m not opposed to being your wife,” I told him in a husky purr as I guided his zipper downward. His cock throbbed against the heel of my hand in response. *Perfect*. “I’d like to be a good one, too. Will you let me?”

This was it. The moment where everything fell into place.

What was the life of one demon—however handsome, however sweet, however kind to me he’d been—in exchange for the fate of the world?

Mal wouldn’t live to see morning...

But I wasn’t kidding about being a good wife.

I’d make sure to give him one hell of a final night.

Mal let out his breath in a long, slow exhale, then pulled me against him hard and fast as he brought his lips down to brush against my ear.

I braced myself for it. *Yes*, he’d say. *Let’s see what you can do*.

My pussy was already glowing hot with anticipation. My mouth was watering—I was all too ready to get on my knees and take his cock between my lips. I wanted to worship him, please him, make him moan for me just like he’d made me moan for him—

“That’s mighty cute, darlin’,” Mal growled in my ear. “But no.”

My heart fell in an instant.

Fuck.

What had I done wrong?

“Because...” I pulled back slightly to stare up at him in confusion. “Because you don’t think I want it?” I grabbed his hand and moved between my legs. “No one’s twisting my arm right now, Mal. I want you. Honestly. See?”

Mal cupped my pussy firmly. A growl rumbled in his throat as he slipped his fingers into my folds. I knew he could feel it—my slickness. My heat.

Proof. I was ready for him. He wanted me—and I wanted him, too.

“Oh, I believe it, Ava.” He gave my cunt a squeeze, then pulled his fingers away, flicking them against my clit as he withdrew. It was enough to make me gasp, desperate for more. “But I know the second I force my cock into that slick, tight cunt of yours, I’m sentencing myself to death. Or did ya think I didn’t know about that?”

Oh.

Well...

Extra fuck.

I pulled back abruptly, blushing harder than I had in a long time.

All this time, I’d thought I’d been playing him—and now, I was mortified.

He’d let me do it. He’d let me come onto him, let me try to *seduce* him...

And he’d known.

All this time, he’d known exactly what I was up to.

“That was cruel of you.” I moved to my wardrobe and pulled a silk nightie out of it, then shoved it on over my head as quickly as I could.

“Told ya I wasn’t a good man.” Mal smirked as he watched me tug the nightie down over my thighs.

“You could have just said you knew from the start.” My cheeks were on fire. *Idiot*. I’d made an ass of myself coming onto him—not once now, but twice. All for nothing.

“And miss out on that little show you just put on?” Mal sucked his fingers, still slick with my honey, between his lips. “Nah. I enjoyed it too much. Besides—you coulda warned me.”

“I tried! At the altar...” My shoulders slumped in defeat as I stared at him from across the room. “I *tried*. But you wouldn’t let me. And now...”

Mal glanced down at his unzipped jeans, then back up to me. His cock was still hard—I could see the outline of it through his boxers.

“At a bit of an impasse, ain’t we?” he said with a dark chuckle. I couldn’t tell if he really thought this was funny...or just awkward enough that even a demon had to laugh. “I want you, you want me... Question now is, how come you want me *dead*?”

“I don’t...” I grumbled with frustration and headed for my bed. I wanted to be buried beneath my covers right now. At least if I was hiding underneath them, he couldn’t continue to laugh at me while my face was burning red. “I don’t want to kill you, Mal. It’s just...I have a good reason for wanting this, okay?”

“Which is?”

I stared at him, blinking. What could I possibly tell him? *Sorry, buddy—I just need to fuck you and get pregnant so the world doesn’t end?*

“It’s complicated,” I mumbled lamely as I got into bed. I pulled the covers up around my neck and turned to face the wall. I knew I would find some way to square this circle eventually. My mother had prophesized that Mal and I would have a child together. My mother’s visions were never wrong. But I was exhausted. I was still pretty mortified. And her vision hadn’t demanded that this baby be made *tonight*. “But it’s nothing personal. Let’s just leave it at that.”

“Well, it’s nothin’ personal that I’d rather stay breathin’, too. Glad we’re in agreement.” I heard Mal’s belt clank again—this time, against the floor.

When I glanced back over my shoulder, I saw him moving toward me wearing only his boxers.

It wasn’t a bad sight. Not in the least. But...what exactly was he playing at now?

“You’re getting into bed,” I said. *Thanks, Captain Obvious!*

“I am.” The mattress creaked softly as Mal shifted beneath the covers next to me. “That all right?”

“I...guess so. If you want to.” I said. Maybe I should have asked him to leave. He *had* just embarrassed me. Badly. Knowingly. But at the same time...I’d sort of just tried to kill him.

Maybe now, we were even.

“It all right if I hold you?” he offered.

I rolled over to find his arm lifted and outstretched, ready to welcome me into his embrace.

“You really want to cuddle?” I asked, dubious. “After...after...”

After I just tried to sentence you to death with my pussy, was how that sentence ended, of course. But I couldn’t quite bring myself to say it.

“Don’t see why not,” Mal said, saving me the trouble. “I’m still yer husband, Ava. And you’re still my wife. This here...it’s what married folks are supposed to do, ain’t it?”

I thought about arguing with him. Thought about pointing out that our marriage wasn’t a real marriage. We weren’t in love. He wasn’t a real husband, and I wasn’t a real wife.

But it had been a long night, and it had been far too long since I’d been held by a man.

Especially a man who looked as good as Mal.

“All right,” I said, shifting my body against his. “But no funny business.”

“I could say the same to you, darlin’,” Mal purred into my ear. He wrapped me up in his arms and once again, I found myself surprised at how good that felt.

My body fit perfectly against his. Like I’d been...made for him. Or something.

That was ridiculous, of course. Not possible, for that matter.

But it still felt right. Ridiculously right. Impossibly right.

There were worse notes to end this night on, anyway. Whatever happened come morning... I’d deal with that then.

I closed my eyes, cuddled close, and let myself drift off in his embrace.

MAL

I woke up to an empty bed and the smell of bacon.
The former, I could've done without. But as for the latter...
As a rule, I never said no to breakfast.

The weight of last night was still on my shoulders as I rolled out of bed and headed to the shower. When I checked the wounds on my back in the mirror, they were already healing up. Scabbing over.

But still, undeniably, there.

My wings were gone. They weren't coming back.

As I helped myself to Ava's shower, I was pleased to see she still kept everything exactly in the same places I remembered: all fuckin' over the place. After a little digging through all of her mysterious unlabeled bottles of bath products, I even managed to find the body wash she'd made for me. My old conditioner. My old shampoo.

The angels might have wiped any memory of our love from her mind, but apparently, they hadn't been able to erase everything.

In little ways, our past still lived here in Ava's home. In *our* home.

Beneath the hot water, I scrubbed myself clean and weighed some pros and cons.

The good: I was married to the love of my life. She'd agreed to it willingly—or as willingly as she could. She'd even let me go down on her. Just the memory of the way she'd tasted, how she'd begged for me—it was enough to make my cock stiff. Definitely good.

The bad: I was human now. Powerless to protect her with anything more than the strength of my own two hands. There was a hell-steed stabled outside that liked me about as much as I liked it—more of an annoyance than anything, really—and even more annoying, if I got too greedy about what I wanted to do to Ava with this hard cock of mine, we’d bring about the end of the world.

And there it was—the ugly.

If I went out and bent Ava over the breakfast table the way I would’ve liked to this morning, it would kill me.

I wasn’t afraid of death, of course.

What I was afraid of was who would be left to take care of my new bride through the apocalypse once I was gone.

Out of the shower, I toweled off and tossed yesterday’s boxers into Ava’s laundry hamper. Another annoyance: no fresh clothes. My shirt from last night was ruined—slit down the back from just before the wedding ceremony, when Ava’s mother had taken my wings. My jeans were looking pretty scummy, too.

I shrugged and wrapped the towel around my waist. Clothes were a problem for another time—and it wasn’t like my new bride would mind seeing me so underdressed.

Maybe, if I played my cards right, I could even hear her beg for my cock again.

I swaggered out into the kitchen. The scent of freshly brewed coffee joined the smell of the bacon in the hall.

It was time to say good morning to my wife.

I found her bent over, peering into the oven and swearing beneath her breath. She wore the same nightgown she’d fallen asleep in last night. Its hem kissed the lower curves of her round, firm ass in a way that nearly made me jealous.

My towel rose up at its center as, between her thighs, I caught a glimpse of her pretty pink cunt.

“Smells good.” I pulled the towel a little tighter over my hips as I stepped into the room, making my presence known.

“Mal?” Ava jumped at the sound of my voice. As she turned her head toward me, her eyes went wide—her wrist brushed against the inside of the oven door. “Aah!”

“Careful.” I moved behind her immediately and took her slender wrist in my hand. My other hand, I placed on her hip so I could guide her to the sink. I flipped the faucet on cold and brought Ava’s wrist beneath it. “There. That better?”

She let out a breath, then nodded. “Yes. Um. Thank you. Sorry. I just didn’t expect you to come out and—”

“Did you forget I was here?” I asked with a chuckle.

That would’ve been rich. Forgotten about by my own soulmate—not once, but twice.

“No. I just didn’t think you would come out dressed like *that*.”

“Your mother didn’t exactly summon me here with my bags packed and ready to move in with ya,” I pointed out.

“Right. Of course.” Ava took a breath. I could almost feel her imagining exactly how few layers were between my cock and her ass right now. One short little silk nightgown. One fluffy white towel. “I’ll, um. I’ll see about getting you some fresh clothes after breakfast. In the meantime, I think there’s some of my burn salve over by the oven, if you don’t—”

I was already halfway there. I remembered where it was.

“...mind,” Ava finished as I brought it over. “Thanks.”

“Not a problem.” I dragged my fingers across the surface of the salve as Ava dried her wrist off. With my fingertips, I worked the ointment into her skin. She was just as pale as she’d been in my memories. Just as soft and smooth, too. “It’s not a bad burn. Only a little pink. This oughta clear it right up.” I blinked as I remembered—I wasn’t supposed to know anything about Ava’s magical little concoctions. “Ah...right?”

“Right,” Ava said after a beat. “But how did you—”

“What’s this?” I changed the subject quickly as I noticed a little cut on her palm. “Your witchy friends didn’t do this to you, did they?”

“That? No. Of course not.” Ava ran her thumb over the cut. “I broke a picture frame last night just before I headed out. It...seemed like a bad omen at the time.” I caught the hint of a frown on her face as she slipped away from me. “I guess it probably was.”

“Because I wouldn’t fuck you?”

“Yes—well, I mean. No. Because...oh, no! I completely forgot...” She grabbed a kitchen towel and pulled the tray of blackened bacon out of the oven. She shoved it onto the counter with a scowl. “I left it in for a little

longer than I should have—I like it crispy. But...ugh. Sorry. Now it's ruined."

"Not for me." I licked my fingers, then plucked a charred strip out of the pan and crunched down on it. "I like it burned."

"Lucky you, then." She mopped her brow with the kitchen towel as she closed the oven door, then grabbed a spatula. "At least my yolks aren't set yet. The eggs should be all right."

As Ava tended to the eggs, I decided to make myself useful. She had a fresh loaf of sourdough sitting on the counter. I found the bread knife and started slicing it up, then popped it into the toaster for a quick tan.

Together, we finished getting breakfast ready. Ava's favorite: eggs in chili oil. My favorite: burned-to-a-crisp bacon. Coffee—hers, loaded with cream and sugar, and mine, black as sin. Sourdough toast with grass-fed butter and her homemade blackberry-basil jam. A plate of golden-crisp hash browns with homemade crème fraîche and chives from Ava's garden—and just like that, we were ready to eat.

"You were sayin' somethin'," I reminded her as we sat down. "Before you burned my bacon for me."

"Oh. Right." Ava pulled her napkin onto her lap and sighed. "I was trying to tell you, just...I'm sorry that my mother dragged you into this. I'm sorry...for not telling you about the curse." She shrugged. "Not that it seemed like I needed to, but..."

"You didn't exactly want to be there last night either." I fought back the urge to scowl with another bite of bacon. "I could tell. And, to be fair, you did try to tell me about the curse...at a point. Everything after that...you said you had yer reasons. I believe ya."

"You do?"

"I don't think yer a bad person, Ava." I broke the yolks of my eggs with the crust of my sourdough and let them soak into the bread. "Just seems an awful shame that you and I've gotten off on the wrong foot, is all."

"Me too." She gave me a plaintive look. "Like I said last night. All of this...it's complicated."

"And on the altar, after the ceremony...was that *complicated* too?"

"A little. At first, at least." She brushed her hair behind her ear as she looked away. "But by the end...less so."

“Because you wanted me?” I asked. This was important. Maybe not to her—but certainly to me. “Or because you felt like you were supposed to?”

“Both,” she said immediately. “Or...neither. Or...” She tossed her hands up in indecision. “I don’t know, Mal. Can’t we just eat? Does it even matter?”

“Would it have mattered if I’d been someone else?”

“Like who?”

“Some other demon sent to ravish you.”

“I don’t know. Maybe...” She stirred her coffee, staring down into the swirls of cream as they mixed in with the black. “Okay, probably, yeah. You’re... You’re not what I expected.”

“How do you figure that?”

“Well...you’re handsome.”

I laughed—a sharp, humorless kind of thing. “Plenty of handsome demons in hell.”

“Not like...like you, I bet,” Ava said. “And you’ve been kind to me. You took so much care last night to make sure that I wasn’t being forced into anything. You didn’t have to, either. Thank you, by the way. I appreciated that.”

“Don’t need to thank me for doin’ the bare minimum,” I assured her. “Why would I want a woman who didn’t want me back?”

“Someone else—another demon—might not have cared about that so much. It was noble of you, okay? Learn to take a compliment, Mal. I didn’t expect a demon to care about consent.”

“Hell was built on free will, darlin’.” Lord Almighty—of all the things she’d forgotten, I wished she hadn’t forgotten *that*. “You think that snake went and tempted Eve in that garden just for shits and giggles? It’s not sin if someone makes ya do it.”

Slowly, Ava raised her gaze to me. “Is that what you want to do with me? Sin?”

A flick of her pink tongue from between her rosy lips. A careful flutter of her lashes.

It was cute—and admittedly, almost effective.

But I knew Ava better than she realized—which meant I knew exactly what she looked like when she was trying to seduce a man.

Exactly like she was trying far too hard.

“I wanna do all sorts of things to you, Ava. Sinnin’ among them.” Gently, I shook my head. “But not if you’re gonna go actin’ like that.”

“Like...like what?” she asked, playing innocent.

Fuckin’ hell. Whatever reason Ava’d had to go through with our marriage last night, it must have been a compelling one.

Compelling enough that she’d apparently forgotten: I knew exactly what happened if I sinned with Ava as much as I would’ve liked.

Then again...

A *little* sin had never hurt anyone.

At least, not much.

“You know exactly what I mean,” I said, scooting my chair back. I spread my legs a little further apart and patted my knee. “Now. Why don’t you stop tryin’ to tempt me to my own death and c’mere instead.”

“On your lap?” She stared at the towel as she slowly arched an eyebrow. “I hardly see how that’s not tempting you not to...”

“I’m stuck here until we figure out some kinda way around the little deal your mother finagled that doesn’t end up with me dead,” I informed her. “But that don’t mean we can’t enjoy each other in more...nonlethal ways in the meantime.”

“Right.” She eyed my lap for a moment, then rose from her chair. I could practically see her will collapse. Whether she was coming over to my lap because she wanted to feel me against her again, or if she was just hoping she’d be able to find a way to tempt me from some new angle was yet to be seen.

But I didn’t mind.

I still wanted Ava. Still loved her. Still cherished the chance to have her close.

Even if—for whatever reason—she still wanted me dead.

What was love without a little danger, after all?

She was the most delicious kind of danger I’d ever known.

Gingerly, she placed herself on my lap, careful not to give me her full weight.

I took care of that with a quick backwards tilt of my chair. A soft *oh!* sprang from Ava’s lips as she was tossed against me by the motion. I kept us like that until she’d settled.

“What now?” she asked quietly. “You’ve got me where you want me. I’m at your mercy, Mal. Just the way you like it, right?”

“Just the way I like it,” I repeated with a smile as I stared up at the starburst of freckles across the bridge of her nose. “Now. I wanna know—and this is important—how much of this little seduction game of yers is honest, and how much of it is just on account of your mysterious *reasons*? Whatever the hell those are.”

Her gaze wandered across my face like she was tracing every line of it. Remembering me, maybe? Surely not.

Probably just reminding herself that, despite my dashing good looks, I was still a bad hombre well worth the death sentence that loving her properly would incur.

“After the ceremony,” Ava finally whispered down to me. “I liked... what you did to me. And even though it was infuriating at the time...I’m glad that you stopped.”

“Because you’ve decided ya don’t want me dead after all?”

“I didn’t like the idea of killing you from the start,” she admitted. “And...I like it even less now. But that’s not what I meant. I meant that I like how you have that kind of self-control.”

“Self-control.” I laughed, dark and rich as the coffee she’d made for us, then laid a hand on top of her pale, slender thigh. “I reckon I’ve got a little of that, maybe...” Boldly, I smoothed my hand up her skin, shifting it to the hem of her nightgown. “But not that much.”

Her breath caught in her throat and she tensed at my touch.

“That’s your game, then?” she whispered. “I’m not allowed to put the moves on you, but you’re allowed to toy with me as much as you like?”

“What if it is?” I purred against her neck. “I may not be able to be a proper husband to ya, darlin’...but that don’t mean I’m gonna starve you completely. Pretty woman like you—you deserve to be pleased.” I pressed a kiss to her shoulder, then smiled against her skin. “Besides, if ya liked what I did to you on the altar last night—”

“Mal...” She placed her hand over mine as she turned toward me, stopping me before my fingers could reach the heat of her cunt. “I *did* like that. And...I know I would like more of it, too. But when I begged you last night...” She sighed. It was followed by a noise of frustration. She clenched her knees together and slumped back against me, obviously annoyed. “I begged you because I needed it. Not for my *reasons*—I needed it for *me*.”

“Mm. Good. Then why don’t I give you a little more?” I moved my hand upward again, but again, she stopped me.

“Because,” she said through her teeth. “A little more is never enough.”

I didn’t like it...but I understood. I felt it too.

When it came to Ava and me, nothing had ever been enough.

But I’d made my peace with that long ago, back when I first fell in love with her. For Ava, though...she was experiencing it all over again. The need. The pressure. The denial. The disappointment.

Satisfaction or death. Those were our only options together. Always had been—always would be.

For a moment, I thought about giving in. Dying to give Ava what her heart desired was a tempting thing indeed—especially when her heart’s desire was having my big, thick cock buried deep inside her perfect cunt.

But there were bigger things than my cock to consider now. Ava’s safety, for one. The fate of the world, for another.

“Maybe it’s finally time that you tell me why it is you married me, darlin’.” If I understood her convictions better, maybe it would make this easier on both of us. That way, I could start talking her out of them.

She certainly wouldn’t have put herself in this position if she knew what I did.

A look of pity crossed over her face as she placed her arms around my neck and stroked my hair.

“Maybe it’s time you told me how you knew about my curse,” she countered, running her fingers along the back of my neck.

Ah. So that was how it was gonna be.

Tit for tat—and not in any way I liked.

“Looks like we’re at another impasse, then,” I grumbled. Revealing it all to her now—the love we’d shared, the memories she’d lost—with things being how they were presently, it wouldn’t help her. It’d only make this hurt all the more.

“Looks like,” she agreed. “So until we can figure out some terms we’re both comfortable with...” She winced, like she hated what she was proposing even as she suggested it. “Maybe we should try to keep our hands off each other for a little while?”

I didn’t like that either—but I could see on her face what a bind she’d found herself in.

It was the same one I'd been in myself ever since I'd first laid eyes on her pretty face.

Lord Almighty—how we were punished for the things we wanted.

God help us if we ever found a better way to sin.

“All right,” I agreed. Didn't like it, but if it made her life easier...I could manage. “Truce.”

I offered her my hand and she laughed as she shook it.

“All right,” she repeated. “Truce—for now.”

AVA

Keeping my hands off Mal was hard.
Keeping *him* off *me*...
That was even harder.

As our first week together passed, I woke up in bed every morning to Mal's stiff cock pressing up against my ass and his hands wandering my body beneath the sheets—gripping my hips, cupping my pussy and squeezing my breasts.

I never stopped him, of course. If I said I didn't like the way it felt, it would have been a lie.

I liked it. I liked the way he said my name in a husky growl—*Ava*—or sometimes just *darlin'*. I liked the way he talked dirty to me in his sleep.

That pussy smells so sweet, darlin'.

Mm. Ava. C'mere and let me put those pretty lips of yours to work.

No man had ever talked to me like that before. Not in my entire life.

If it had been anyone else, I would have hated it. But with Mal...no. I liked it far too much.

I liked it a *lot*.

When Mal finally woke up and realized he'd been groping me, he was always apologetic and sweet. It was like the beast within him—the one that only came out when he was ready to fuck—was one that he was able to chain down at will.

Unfortunately, I was quickly coming to find that there was a beast inside me, too. And mine was far, *far* less interested in being caged.

It wanted Mal. It was obsessed with his scent, the heat of his breath, the sweat on his skin when he came in from cleaning out the old stable house for dinner every evening—even the little noises of pleasure he made when he ate.

When I went to work at the flower shop every day, the hungry thing inside me took up all the space in my brain as it replayed every word he said to me—only so, so much dirtier.

This is mighty tasty, darlin’.

Think I might need a second helpin’ of this, darlin’.

Darlin’, darlin’, darlin’. That word was becoming practically Pavlovian to me. Mal said it so casually—but every time he did it, it never failed to get me wet.

I knew that we couldn’t sleep together. The second we gave in, his fate would be sealed.

I couldn’t let Mal die because of my inability to control myself.

But even when I tried to avoid his touches and ignore his words of praise at breakfast and dinner every day, I only found myself wanting him more.

“Darlin’.” Mal entered the kitchen mopping sweat from his neck with his t-shirt. His sun-kissed skin was shiny and slick. In his hand, he held a messy little bouquet of pretty pink roses. He handed them to me as he came over to the table and gave me a kiss on the cheek. “Here. Picked these for you.”

“Not from my garden, I hope,” I teased. Though, they didn’t look like any flowers that I grew—and since I grew everything, that was saying something.

“Naw. Found ‘em out in the forest. They’re Eglantines, I think.” Mal took the bundle of silverware I’d been holding from me and took them to the table. The rest of the dishes were already in place for dinner.

“They’re beautiful. Thank you. And thank you for doing *that*, too.” I nodded to the table, where Mal had already started to put the forks and knives in place, then turned to the china hutch for a vase. “There’s a story about Eglantines, you know. They say the Devil planted the first bush of them so he could try to climb back up to Heaven on their thorns.”

“He did,” Mal said with a chuckle. “They dropped him right on his sorry ass, too.”

“I can imagine.” I picked out a pretty lavender-colored Depression glass vase and dropped the flowers into it, then took it to the sink to fill it with water. “I suppose you and the Devil must, ah...travel in the same circles, so to speak.”

Mal laughed. I turned just in time to see his face light up as he grinned. “All nine of ‘em. Sometimes, he even lets me borrow his pitchfork. What’s for dinner?” Mal sniffed the air. “Smells good.”

“Skillet chicken in cream sauce.” I inclined my head to the cast iron pan on the stove. “It’s got sun-dried tomatoes and wild mushrooms in it. My grandma always called it, ah...” I tucked my hair behind my ear and laughed, a little awkwardly. “*Marry Me* chicken.”

“Bit late for that, don’t ya reckon?” Mal grabbed a kitchen towel and lifted the pan’s lid. A throaty hum of pleasure rumbled in his throat as he breathed in the scent. “Then again...next time your Ma wants to summon me to get hitched to you, you can just have her haul a pan of this out to the woods. You’d have every devil in Hell wrapped around those pretty fingers of yours for somethin’ this good.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” I bumped Mal out of the way with my hip so I could start serving up plates. “It’ll save us a lot of time reading incantations in Latin, at least.”

Mal and I sat down at the table to eat together. At least the food served as a momentary distraction from how much I wanted to sink my teeth into those broad shoulders of his—though, it would have been easier to focus on eating if he would have been so kind as to put a shirt on first.

“How’s the work on the stables going?” I asked, reaching for the pitcher of cold lavender lemonade I’d laid out before Mal came in. He beat me to it, though. My fingers brushed against his knuckles as he filled my glass, then his own. “Does Geryon seem happy out there?”

“He’s stopped nippin’ at me every time I go out to brush him down at least. That little shit’s lucky I’m such a patient man.” Mal rolled his eyes as he grumbled about the horse—though I suspected he liked Geryon more than he was willing to let on. “Reckon I’ll finish fixin’ the stables up by tomorrow. After that, might see about buildin’ a fence around that pasture out back. It’s yours, ain’t it?”

“It is. The Greens own most of the land south of Greenriver, actually. The town’s named after us—or, after a great-great-great-grandmother of mine, anyway.”

“Was she one of you Seventh Daughters too?” Mal took a bite of his chicken and closed his eyes as he chewed, rumbling with pleasure again. “This is damn good.”

I squeezed my knees a little tighter together in response. It was a *very* enticing sound.

“She was,” I said, clearing my throat and composing myself. “Every generation of my family has gone pretty much the same. Every woman has seven children—all girls—and the youngest one inherits all the magic.”

“And the curse, too?” Mal asked.

“Always.” I frowned. When I was able to forget about my family’s curse, things between Mal and I were...nice. Better than nice, actually. But of course, our situation being what it was, the reminder that my pussy was essentially a deadly weapon was never far away. “They say it was placed on one of our ancestors by a demon, actually. Maybe you know him, too.”

“Maybe so.” Mal’s knife scraped jarringly against the plate. “So for every daughter born into your family, the mother buries the body of the father. That’s how it goes, right?”

“That’s how it goes,” I confirmed, then gulped at my lemonade. My mouth was suddenly dry. This conversation was starting to hit a little close to home. “So tradition dictates that Green women who are Seventh Daughters only ever, ah...go to bed with evil men, I guess you could say.”

“That why you agreed to marry me, then?” Mal raised his gaze up from his plate. “You reckon I’m a bad man?”

I swallowed the last of my lemonade and placed my glass back on the table.

“I thought you were evil when I agreed to all of this,” I admitted. Was there really any point in lying now? “So, yes. I guess I did.”

Mal grabbed the pitcher and refilled my glass. His eyes were still locked on mine with intensity. “And what do you think of me now?”

“I think you’re...” I began—but before I could finish my sentence, Mal’s eyes darted to the window behind me.

Immediately, he took the napkin from his lap and patted his lips with it as he rose from the table.

“S’cuse me, darlin’. Need to head back outside for a sec.”

“What’s wrong?” I asked. This was a hell of a time to decide our conversation needed a recess, after all.

“Nothin’ you need to worry your pretty head about,” Mal assured me. He grabbed his t-shirt from the counter and tugged it back on as he headed for the door. “Keep eatin’. This won’t take long. Promise.”

But as I glanced out the window behind me, I wasn’t so sure about that.

There was a dark-haired man standing in my garden outside. He wore an expensive suit and looked like he’d been transported straight from an issue of GQ.

I didn’t know his face well—but I knew it well enough.

It was another demon—Bea’s husband, Don.

Fuck.

Quietly, I rose from the table and slipped out the door as well.

I hadn’t told Bea about my marriage with good reason. I didn’t know how close Don and Mal were, but back when the plan had been *fuck and kill a demon on my wedding night to save the world*, I hadn’t wanted to risk any of the great and sinister Malacoda’s old buddies showing up to wedding crash.

But now, it seemed like my lie-by-omission hadn’t worked out in my favor at all.

If Don was showing up here unannounced, then Don probably already knew *exactly* what I’d done.

I tiptoed around the edge of the house, keeping my back against the wall so I could listen in.

I didn’t know what Don wanted from Mal—but it was in my best interest to find out. If he was only the first of many demons who were about to bear down on Greenriver to reclaim their captured comrade, I’d need to call my mother and let her know that we were about to have a whole lot of company—straight from Hell itself.

I held my breath as I perked my ears up for their voices, listening with care.

“I’m trying, Mal. Believe me. I know how much is at stake.” Don sounded vexed. “You didn’t help your case at all by marrying her, you know. You’ve created a bond between the two of you that’s going to be difficult to break.”

“Who said anything about breakin’ it?” Mal’s voice. He sounded as angry as the other man was annoyed.

“I did, you stubborn bastard. You can’t really expect to keep her *and* get out of this mess. Or did you think you were going to be able to have your cake and eat it, too? You’re not—”

There was a dull *oof* sound, immediately followed by the noise of a body hitting stone.

It seemed that Mal had just shoved Don against the cottage’s wall.

“Go on, then.” Mal’s drawl was a low, threatening growl. “Tell me what I’m not.”

“Oh, stop it, Mal. I was about to say that you’re not thinking straight—and you’ve just confirmed it.”

Mal grunted. Don must have pushed him back.

“So maybe I’m not,” Mal said. “You reckon you’d be doin’ any better in my place?”

“Never said that. But if you want someone to take this out on, look elsewhere. I’m trying to help you. If you don’t want that—I don’t know. Call Mother. You always *were* her favorite.”

Mother? Mal hadn’t mentioned any of his family—with all the sexual tension that filled our every interaction here in the cottage, bringing up family would have only made things even more awkward.

Don didn’t look anything like Mal. They were both handsome, sure, but Mal was auburn-haired and blue-eyed. Don’s eyes were gray. They didn’t share any of the same coloring.

But from the way Don was talking...

It sounded like Bea’s husband and my own were actually...brothers?

I didn’t even realize that demons could *have* those.

“I’m not bringin’ Ma into this. You know good and well that she’d only complicate things further—assumin’ she’s even still workin’ on our side at all.”

“Glad you’ve come to the same conclusion I have. Maybe some part of your head is still working after all,” said Don. “So we’re in agreement then. My advice is all you’ve got.”

“And what’s your advice, then?”

“You need to break this marriage. As soon as you can. Sever the bond between you and it’ll save more than just your life. It’ll buy us time—time we could all use right now.”

“Right. So, what?” Mal scoffed. “You want me to divorce her?”

“Don’t play dumb, Mal. Even for normal humans, you know it’s never as easy as that. Not in the eyes of the Almighty, at least. But Ava isn’t a regular woman—and even in your newly human state, neither are you.”

Newly human state...

Last I’d checked, Mal was a demon. A creature straight from the pits of Hell itself.

He wasn’t a human at all.

So why was Don calling him one?

“All right. So divorce is off the table,” Mal grumbled. I almost breathed a sigh of relief at that. I knew things were difficult right now... but I didn’t hate being married to Mal. He was more than just sweet to me. Take away the fact that we barely knew each other and the issues surrounding the two of us having sex, and honestly? I was happy living with him. Happier than I’d been in a long time. “What will do it, then?”

“You’re not going to like it.”

“Big surprise. I don’t like any of this.”

“Fine. Then stop playing house with her. Stop bringing her flowers—don’t think I didn’t see those Eglantines through the window. Keep your distance. Push her away. Cheat on her, if you have to—”

“Like hell I will.” Mal’s growl was back. He sounded more furious than ever.

I knew it was wrong, but I couldn’t help the way that made me feel. Like my whole chest was full of those roses he’d brought me tonight—with butterflies fluttering around them, to boot.

“Have it your way. But you need to stop entertaining this notion that the two of you can be together. And fast, too. If you give Ava’s mother what she wants, you’ll die for it.”

“Like I need remindin’.”

“I’m just saying. The closer you get, the harder this will be. For both of you.”

“That’s all, then?” Mal asked. “Act like a shitty husband and suddenly all of this goes away?”

“No, Mal.” Don sighed with exasperation. “The Almighty won’t consider your marriage over until you’ve failed her. Wounded her. Deeply.”

“You want me to—to what? Hit her? *Hurt* her?”

I gulped. Would Mal really do that just to get out of his deal with my mother? Would he really do that to *me*?

I didn't think so, but...

No matter what way I looked at this, it didn't look like I was getting out of this unharmed either way.

"It doesn't matter how you go about it," said Don. "But ultimately, if you want to make it easier for us to get you out of this situation... You're going to have to break her heart."

I brought my hand up to my sternum and curled my fingers into a fist over my skin. Beneath my knuckles, my heartbeat was pounding like a butcher's hammer tenderizing bloody meat.

He'd have to break my heart. That was all. When Mal's brother said it, he made it sound so easy.

Maybe if I hadn't been such a silly little idiot, it would have been. Maybe it wouldn't have even hurt.

But as I drew away, heading back to the front door, I knew that avoiding hurt was beyond me now.

I'd only known Mal for a week. Not long enough to really know him at all.

But I knew the way his eyes crinkled and his entire face lit up when I made him laugh.

I knew the foods he liked—steak seared rare, mashed potatoes, apple pie with vanilla ice cream on the side. A glass of whiskey after—neat, and only ever just the one. I knew how he took his coffee—black—and how he liked his bacon—burned to a crisp.

I saw how well he cared for Geryon, even though he said he didn't even *like* the horse he'd ridden in on.

I knew how well he cared for me.

He'd tended my burn with such gentleness when I'd seared myself on the oven door. He held doors for me. Called me *darlin'*. Refilled my glass the second it was empty. Gathered up the dishes and started washing them before I could even move to collect them myself.

When we'd been forced into our marriage—me by my sense of duty, him by whatever spell my mother had him under—he'd asked over and over again for my consent, just to make sure I'd wanted to be bound to him.

I knew the feel of his lips on my mouth, my cheek, my breasts, my cunt—the taste of his cock and the sound he made when he came. Every night, I felt the humidity of his skin when he came from the shower and the heat of his body when I slept in his arms.

All things considered, it felt like I knew him better than I should have. It wasn't love. I wasn't *that* stupid.

But it wasn't...nothing.

I clenched my eyes shut tight as I grabbed the doorknob.

Apparently, at the thought of having my heart broken by him, whatever I felt for Mal was enough to make me want to cry.

"Darlin'?"

I tensed at the sound of his voice and mentally kicked myself for not getting back inside sooner.

As I turned, I found Mal behind me, climbing over my hydrangea bushes onto the cobblestone path that led from my front gate to the door.

"Mal." I swallowed back my tears. If I was going to cry about this, then I was going to do it in private. Somewhere that Mal couldn't see. "I was just...just headed back inside."

"Right." He stared at me for a long moment, then took a step forward. "So how much of that did you hear, then?"

I thought about lying to him. *Oh, nothing! Nothing at all! I was just out here picking posies—what on earth are you talking about?*

But Mal hadn't lied to me. Not so far, at least.

I wasn't about to betray whatever small trust we still had between us by lying to him first.

"I heard enough." My chest deflated at the word. *Enough.*

The truth shouldn't have hurt so much.

"Right." Mal nodded to the door. "Then I reckon it's best if we both get back inside."

"So you can start—what? Making me hate you? *Beating* me?" My words came out colder and crueller than I expected them to. If Mal wanted to hurt me, then he was in luck. He'd already started.

Mal furrowed his brow and looked at me like I'd just lost my mind.

"Now why the hell would I do that?" He marched forward and took my elbow in his hand. With his other, he shoved the door open. "Oughta whip your ass the color of a Tijuana sunrise for eavesdroppin'—but no. I'm not gonna beat you, Ava. What kinda man do you think I am?"

“Last I checked, you weren’t a *man* at all,” I shot back at him as he pulled me inside. “As for beating me—it certainly sounds like you were thinking about it.”

Mal closed the door behind us. As soon as it slammed shut, he took my wrists in his hands and shoved me up against it.

“You might think you heard enough out there, but you obviously weren’t listenin’.” He loomed over me as he pinned me against the oak door. His brow was lowered in a dark scowl.

In that moment, he certainly looked like a demon.

But as for what Mal really was—I wasn’t even sure of *that* anymore.

“Now,” he said through his teeth. “You want answers? You’ll get ‘em. But you’re gonna get ‘em straight from me—not from sneakin’ around snoopin’ on my conversations with my brother. Understand?”

I met his eyes. His expression was full of rage, but his dark blue eyes looked the same as they always did. Honest and true.

“Okay,” I whispered. “Then let’s talk.”

AVA

I led and he followed. We went into the kitchen, where dinner was left on the table, all but abandoned now.

“You’re lookin’ mighty pale, darlin’.” Mal gestured to my plate. My chair. My uneaten meal. “You should eat somethin’.”

“I’m not hungry anymore.” The growling in my belly had been replaced with a cold, slick sense of dread. My gaze washed over him, searching for any small sign of reassurance. The stiffness of his expression offered me none of that. “You look angry.”

“Naw. That ain’t it.” Mal took me by my shoulder and guided me to my chair. He pulled it out for me and, gently, pushed me down into it. “I’m...vexed, is all.”

“Yeah. I feel that.” It was good to be off my feet at least—even if it had taken Mal’s prompting to get me there. “I’m feeling pretty vexed too. So.”

His eyes were piercing as he stood over me. “So.”

We stayed like that for a moment. Watching. Waiting.

There were so many things to talk about—enough that it was hard to know where to start.

“I’m sorry for eavesdropping. I know it was wrong.” It had been pure compulsion—a combination of fear and worry that hung over our entire marriage like a black cloud. “Are you really going to spank me for it?”

Mal laughed, then sat down himself. “Do ya want me to?”

I looked him over. Would it be so bad, being taken over Mal's knee? I could almost imagine the way his hand would feel, coming down on my ass over and over again—though, that would only exacerbate how badly I wanted him.

Something neither of us needed right now.

"Presently...no," I said.

"Then I won't," he promised. "Ain't gonna beat ya, either."

"I..." I sighed. Now that my initial shock at Mal's mention of hurting me physically had worn off, I could appreciate the tone of voice he'd said it in. I wasn't dumb. He'd sounded as incensed at the idea as I'd felt. "I didn't really think you would. I was just...scared. Scared and...and..."

"You heard Don's suggestion about me breakin' your heart," Mal guessed.

"I did." I lowered my gaze to my lap and let my hair fall down around my face like a veil. "Are you planning on doing *that*?"

He snorted. "Don reckons I oughta. But...no. Don't think I have it in me to, truth be told." He reached across the table, offering me his hand. "I care for you, Ava. Whatever you think about what you heard out there...I need ya to understand that yer in my heart. Breakin' yours is the last thing I want to do."

"Oh." It didn't feel right to hold his hand—not until I had more answers, at least—but I patted his palm lightly, drumming my fingertips against it. "Well...thank you, I guess."

"Pff. Ya gotta stop thankin' me for all this bare minimum shit. It ain't right." Mal shook his head. "Now. S'pose you've got an awful lot of questions for me, after all that. What's the next one?"

I considered it. He wasn't wrong—there were a *lot*.

But before I got into it, I needed to be sure that none of them were lies.

"Hold on." I rose, then crossed to the china hutch where I kept all the dishes and expensive wares that had been passed down through my family for generations. I found what I was looking for quickly.

It was a smiling cat statue with a raised paw, the same kind that I'd seen in Chinese restaurants from time to time. Only, instead of being white or gold, this one was carved from turquoise.

My mother had used it often when my sisters and I were growing up. After I'd moved back home post-college, she'd passed it onto me.

She called it the truth-cat.

It had never led her astray. It would be just as faithful to me now.

“Cute,” Mal said as I carried the statue over and placed it on the table between us. “What’s it for?”

“Don’t worry about it.” I didn’t need Mal pulling any tricks right now—the less he knew about the cat’s magical properties, the better. “But as for my first question...are you and Don really brothers?”

“We are,” Mal confirmed. I glanced to the truth-cat. Its paw was still pointed skyward—a good sign. “Our mother—Belial—she’s one of the Fallen. An angel tossed outta Heaven for rebelling against the rest of the pack. Dunno if we’re whole brothers, or only half—we never quite figured out who our fathers were—but we’re as close to family as demons can get.”

“I know how that feels,” I said quietly. “All of my sisters are only my half-sisters, too.”

“Reckoned they must’ve been, if every man your Ma’s ever bedded has died for the experience,” Mal admitted. “She ever tell ya who your dad is?”

“No, but my sisters know a little about theirs. Money launderers, kidnappers...serial killers.” I shrugged. “So I know he was probably some kind of evil, whoever he was. Mom was never willing to tell me anything more than that.”

“Seems we’ve got an awful lot in common, you and me.”

“Seems like, yeah.”

“Enough that you’re willin’ to trust me?”

“I’m trying to.” I glanced to the truth-cat again. I’d keep a close eye on it for the rest of this conversation. Trust was a hard thing to develop if you wanted to do it quickly.

The truth-cat would help me know whether Mal’s words were honest—or just lies meant to lead me astray.

“All right. I’ll take it.” Mal held his arms out expectantly, palms up. “Next question?”

I nodded and braced myself. This was about to get...messy.

“If you know Don, then you must know Bea. Right?”

“Course I do. Lock and yer friend Joan, too.”

Of course he did. There was no telling how close all the demons in Hell were—but if Mal was kin to Don, it didn’t surprise me that his network extended beyond that as well.

Which was bad for me. Especially now that Mal had managed to contact his friends.

“So...Bea knows that we’re married, then?” She must have. She and Don were married—and very much in love, too. Anything he knew, she almost certainly knew as well.

Mal arched an eyebrow. “Ya didn’t tell her yourself?”

“No. I didn’t tell her or Joan.” My heart sank gently as Mal reminded me of that small betrayal. If I could’ve told them, I would have—but would they understand that? I had no idea. “I didn’t know that they’d approve. Or, I was worried that Don and Lock wouldn’t, really.” I stared down at my hands on top of the table. The ring that Mal had given me was still beautiful, but that beauty felt marred now. Why couldn’t this just have been a normal marriage? Now, my friends were probably pissed at me for hiding this from them—and Don was calling for Mal to break my heart. “Guess I was right about that.” I sighed. “They must be furious with me.”

“Nah. I doubt it. This was gonna happen sooner or later. My guess is, they’re probably just...concerned. Worried for ya.”

“Worried? Why?”

“Among other things...You don’t usually hide things from your friends like this,” Mal said. “That ain’t like you.”

“How would you know that?” I asked, feeling suddenly defensive.

“Am I wrong?”

Of course he wasn’t. The truth-cat still hadn’t lowered its paw—proof that Mal was right. It was out of character for me to hide things from Bea and Joan.

But Mal didn’t know that yet. He couldn’t have.

Whether I was in his heart or not—he barely knew me at all.

“Maybe I’m a liar. Maybe it’s pathological.” I chose my words carefully—the truth-cat didn’t respond to hypotheticals, and I didn’t want Mal to figure out what it did quite yet. The real truth was, I didn’t know for sure if keeping my wedding secret from Joan and Bea was a betrayal or not. But from the bad, tinny taste in my mouth, it certainly felt like one. I dropped my voice to a low mumble. “Maybe I lie to my friends all the time.”

“Do you, now?” he asked. It didn’t feel like a question—it felt like he was laughing at me. *Do you, now.* He acted like he already had me all figured out.

“You might have known Bea and Joan from before this, but you don’t know me,” I snapped at him. “You don’t know me at—”

I stopped abruptly as the truth-cat lowered its paw. Its tiny hand began to wave up and down, signaling to me.

Lie.

“Mal...” I stared at the cat’s paw and licked my lips. My mouth was suddenly dry. As I glanced up to meet his eyes, I found his blues already locked on me, smoldering with anticipation. “Do you know me?”

Mal stared at me for a moment, then stood.

“I dunno,” he said as he began to pace the kitchen. The cat’s paw continued to bob up and down. “I know that your favorite color is that in-between place where a sunflower’s petals turn from yella to orange. I know yer ticklish—‘specially beneath yer chin. I know that when Fleetwood Mac comes on the radio, you know every word to every song because you used to listen to ‘em with yer sisters in yer ma’s flower shop after school every day, and that you can’t stand the Backstreet Boys for the exact same reason. I know your favorite season is mid-autumn when all the trees change colors, and I know that when you asked me if I was gonna spank you, part of you was half-hopin’ I’d say yes.” Mal stopped pacing and turned to face me. As his gaze stroked over me, I knew he could see the pink rising up in my cheeks at his words. “So. Do I know you?” He stopped and stood over me, towering. “You tell me.”

The truth-cat’s paw had stopped moving. It was pointing up to the ceiling once more, completely still.

But I didn’t need a magical object to know that Mal wasn’t lying.

He knew so many things about me. Things that I’d never told him—things that he couldn’t have known unless he’d heard them straight from my lips.

“How?” I whispered up to him. “How do you know?”

Mal closed his eyes for a moment, then lowered himself down onto one knee next to my chair. “What I’m about to tell ya may not be the easiest to believe, Ava. But I need ya to trust me on it. It ain’t somethin’ I’d ever lie about. All right?”

I glanced at the truth-cat. No movement there.

So far, so good.

“All right,” I told him. “Say it, then.”

“You and me, darlin’...” Mal took my hand in his. “This ain’t the first time we’ve been, ah...close, like this.”

“You mean...I’ve known you before?”

Mal laughed and ran his thumb across my knuckles. “You could say that.”

“Are we talking...past lives or something?” I believed in those. Every witch did—at least, a little bit. Mom ran workshops out on her property for it sometimes where she put curious humans into hypnotic trances and helped them unlock visions of who they’d once been.

But she’d never done it for me. Every time I’d asked, she’d always told me the same thing: *for a witch, it’s better not to know*.

Maybe learning about my past lives with the demon Malacoda had been what she’d been trying to protect me from.

Fat load of good it was doing me now.

“Past lives,” Mal repeated. “Yeah, that’s the start of it, at least. But not the whole of it. See, darlin’... About three years ago, give or take, you and me...” Mal shrugged. “We were in love.”

“You’re right—I do find that hard to believe.” I laughed. The truth-cat’s paw still had yet to move, but maybe it was on the fritz. Past lives, I could buy into. This new revelation of Mal’s, though...it was impossible. Too impossible to possibly believe. “You’re not the kind of man I’d easily forget.”

Especially not if I’d fallen in love with him.

I knew myself well enough to know that I *never* would have forgotten about something like that.

“Not of your own accord, no,” Mal said. “But if, say, all your memories of me were taken away...”

“Who would do something like that?” I rolled my eyes. “Rival demons? Fairies? Elves?”

“Angels, darlin’.” Mal raised a finger and pointed up toward the ceiling. “Everything we were—everything you knew of Heaven, Hell, and especially anything you felt for me—the angels decided it was best if you didn’t keep any of it when we had to part ways.”

I sobered, swallowing back my laughter.

Of all the explanations he could have given me in that moment, *angels* were the most ridiculous.

The thing about lies was, they were supposed to sound believable.

I glanced to the truth-cat again. No movement.

This was so far from believable...

It almost *had* to be the truth.

“Angels,” I repeated. “Okay. I’ll bite. *Why?*”

“There’s a prophecy. An ancient one. We didn’t even have the whole of it until a few months ago or so, but...” Mal lowered his gaze. “It said there’d be four children born to the four kings of Hell and their four fated mates.”

“Is that what we are? Fated...*mates?*”

“Given the way you’ve been lookin’ at me like a tree you wanna climb bare-ass naked for the last week...” Mal’s lips twitched in half a smirk. “Don’t see why you’re so surprised at that.”

He was right. I shouldn’t have been surprised at all. I’d chalked up all the times I’d thrown myself at Mal as rampant horniness and a reaction to how handsome he was. We obviously had...chemistry.

But I’d never been so *desperate* for a man before. So desperate that it couldn’t be *just* chemistry.

If my attraction to Mal was being tugged along by the strings of fate itself...that actually made a lot of sense.

“Did the prophecy say anything about these children?”

“One child born of Heaven and Hell—that’s your friend Evie’s daughter with Lucifer. Or, Luke, as you would’ve known him, I s’pose.”

I tilted my head to the side, immediately suspicious. “I don’t have a friend Evie.”

“Not that you remember, no. The angels took a lot from you, darlin’. All your memories of Evie included. But before you lost everything, you and her and Bea and Joan were all thick as thieves. She was crowned queen of Hell so she could rule alongside Lucifer—but there were mishaps. He was turned angel again in the middle of the coronation, and Evie took his place on the throne. Their daughter was conceived shortly after. Heaven and Hell, see?”

“Evie...and Lucifer. Luke.” I didn’t have many friends, but the ones I kept, I kept for life.

A friend I couldn’t even remember, though... Was Evie the pretty blonde in that picture I’d found on the night of my wedding? The thought of losing all memory of someone who’d once been so important to me made my heart ache, like an old, forgotten wound suddenly reopened.

It was a hurt that I'd need to deal with some other time.

"Okay," I said. "What about the second child?"

"One child born of Hell and Earth. That's Bea and Don's daughter—Abbie."

"Abbie...oh, no." I hadn't even gotten to hold little Abbie yet—but she'd been marked by this prophecy from before she was even born. "Does that mean..."

"Joan and Lock's baby is wrapped up in this, too," Mal confirmed. "Lock rejoined the ranks of the angels right before Joan got pregnant. *One child born of Heaven and Earth.*"

"Which leaves...us." I stared at Mal until he looked up at me again. "Doesn't it?"

"It does." Mal nodded, looking grim. "One child born of Earth, and Earth alone."

"I..." I sighed. Everything was clicking together a little bit better now. "I heard Don say something about you not being a demon anymore."

"Yep. I'm all human now, darlin'." Mal held his hands out and let his gaze slide from one callused palm to the other. "Whether I like it or not."

"But...how?" I asked, furrowing my brow. "When my mother summoned you in the clearing, she summoned the *demon* Malacoda. If you're human—"

"Oh, no. That ain't when she summoned me. She was just hollerin' for me to make my appearance, is all." Mal rose from his knees and scoffed as he resumed his pacing. "Maybe she wanted ya to believe I was a demon still—but she took care of that before you showed up."

"Why would she want me to believe you were a demon? Getting married to another human...it might not have scared me as much."

"Hard to say for sure—but I can guess. It's easier on your conscience to kill a big, bad demon than a man, ain't it?"

"Probably, yeah." *I'd been lied to.* By my own mother, no less. That little ceremony she'd put on before we said our vows had just been a clever ruse—one to help me feel better about the fact that as soon as I slept with Mal, he'd be dead. "So...my *mother* made you a human?"

"Summoned me to your woods with my own blood. Bound me to the Earth. Took my wings—"

"The wounds on your back. That's where those are from."

“Course it was. She made me vow to marry ya, bed ya and breed ya before she agreed to unbind me.”

“Classy of her.”

“She’s a classy lady,” Mal grumbled. “Then, she left me to collect myself while she and the other witches in your little cult went to put on that little performance for ya. Geryon showed up while I waited to make my appearance. You know the rest.”

“I do. But...” Something still wasn’t fitting together properly for me. “If we really used to be lovers—if we’re *fated mates*—then why did she have to force you into marrying me? You certainly haven’t seemed happy about it.”

“I loved ya in the past, Ava.” My heart fluttered at that word. *Love*. “If I coulda been with ya under any other circumstances, she wouldn’t have had to bind me at all. But...”

“Of course there’s a *but*.”

“Haven’t told ya all of the prophecy yet,” Mal explained. “These four children—Evie and Luke’s, Bea and Don’s, Joan and Lock’s...yours and mine. Once they’re all of age, the Four Riders of the Apocalypse will set out to claim them.”

“*Claim them?*” My eyebrows shot up immediately. No child of mine was going to be *claimed* by anyone. Least of all a *Rider of the Apocalypse*. “Claim them *how?*”

“Dunno,” Mal admitted. “But believe me—I don’t like it either. Once they do, though...war breaks out between Heaven and Hell on Earth and the apocalypse begins.”

“No,” I said immediately. “That’s not true. It *can’t* be.”

That sold it. The truth-cat was definitely broken.

None of what Mal had told me could possibly be true.

“Well, I did warn ya—” Mal started.

“I know what you warned me,” I snapped. “But your prophecy is a lie.”

“And how do you reckon that?”

“My mother had a prophecy of her own. She’s never wrong.”

“All right.” Mal looked like he was at least willing to entertain this idea. “And what might this prophecy of hers entail?”

“She says the apocalypse is already on its way. And that our child—yours and mine—is the only thing that will save the Earth from it, not

bring it about. If that were the case..." I crossed my arms over my ribs and shook my head. "Mom wouldn't have orchestrated any of this at all."

"Ah, I see." Mal frowned. "And are ya sure she ain't just lyin' about that, too?"

I narrowed my eyes at him. "That's a pretty serious accusation, Mal."

"Then you know I wouldn't be makin' it if I didn't mean it. Ain't like this is the first time in this conversation where her deception has come to light," he pointed out. "Or have you already forgotten that she didn't tell you that I wasn't a demon anymore? Didn't tell you about takin' my wings, either."

"Right." *That* was something I'd need to discuss with her on a later date. "But why would she lie about *this*?"

"Dunno," Mal admitted. "But from the way her little plan's been angled from the start, it seems like she wants you pregnant—and me dead. Considerin' those seven men bad men she burned through just to ensure she could have a seventh daughter to pass her magic onto...your Ma does seem to have a knack for killin' two birds with one stone."

I stared at him, hoping—praying—for a laugh. A wink. Some indication that what he was saying was a joke.

But Mal wasn't joking. He made no sign of it, anyway.

That meant that each second that passed as I waited was more upsetting than the last.

I admired my mother. I'd trusted her. I'd only ever wanted to make her proud. Some of the decisions she'd made in life weren't ones I thought I could have made for myself, sure.

I didn't know that I'd ever be able to kill seven men just to make seven daughters of my own, for example. I hadn't even been able to bring myself to doom even just one with my curse.

Which meant the long line of Green witches very well might end with me.

That thought led to another—one that turned my stomach and left me half sick with dread.

If Mal was right—if my mother's prophecy had been a trick or a lie to get me pregnant...

Oh, *God*.

Had this been Mom's way of easing me into my first pregnancy—and my first kill?

“Mal...”

“Yeah, darlin’?”

“How did my mother get your blood?” I asked. “You said she summoned you here and bound you to Earth with it...but if she needed it to call you here, how’d she get it in the first place?”

Mal let out a dark chuckle and shook his head, keeping his eyes on the table. “Lock heard it from Joan that your ma had cancer. Demon’s blood... it can cure things, y’see. We noticed a necklace she wore an awful lot—so I nicked it. Lock was gonna use his blood—Joan was real torn up about the news—but after he got turned angel again, we figured it was a safer bet to use mine.” He laughed again, a short, clipped bark. “And now we’re here.”

A lump formed in my throat as he spoke. No matter how hard I tried to swallow it down, I couldn’t. It wouldn’t budge.

“It was you,” I whispered. My ears were ringing like alarm bells. *She lied. She lied. She lied.* “Her treatments didn’t start working again. This whole time...you’re the reason she started getting better.”

Mal shrugged. “S’pose I am.”

“You helped her. She could be dead right now if it weren’t for you,” I rasped. My mouth was suddenly bone dry. “And this is how she repaid you for it. Taking your wings. Turning you human. Forcing you into...into *this*.”

“It ain’t all bad, darlin’. At least I got to have you in my life again.” Mal reached for the lemonade pitcher and topped off my glass, then pushed it my way. “Here. Drink. Sounds like you need it.”

I glanced down at the lemonade, then pushed myself to my feet.

“I’m going to need something stronger than lemonade to process this.” I moved to the cabinet where I kept the liquor. Mal had depleted my stores of whiskey this week, but I had a good bottle of gin that I’d been saving for a special occasion.

I uncorked it and took a big swig straight from the bottle. Tonight was definitely *special*—just not in the way I might’ve hoped.

I offered the bottle to Mal next. He probably needed a drink as badly as I did.

But as his fingers wrapped around the bottle, brushing against mine, I held tight for a moment.

“I know you want out of this. Now that I’ve got a glimpse of the bigger picture...I don’t blame you a bit. But I’ve got one more question.”

“Shoot.”

“You said we were in love before I lost my memories.” I bit my lip as I stared down at him. His crooked nose. His thick, auburn lashes. His deep, honest blue eyes and their laugh lines. “Are you still in love with me now?”

Slowly, one side of Mal’s lips curled into half a smile as he tugged the bottle from my fingers.

“’Course I am.” He laughed. “Surprised you even had to ask.”

He tipped back a mouthful of the liquor and I looked to the truth-cat one more time.

Its paw was still raised up in the air. Not even a hint of movement.

No. The cat wasn’t broken. Everything else in the universe might’ve been—but not that.

Mal loved me.

It wasn’t a lie.

AVA

Another week passed. My desires for Mal didn't lessen—if anything, they were getting stronger with every passing day.

But I made a point of keeping my distance better now that all the cards were on the table. Mal and I had been in love before this—in god only knew how many lifetimes. Including this one.

Already, I liked Mal. I wanted him. I was even starting to have feelings for him—though I didn't dare inspect them too hard.

I knew exactly how simple it would be to fall for him again. Like drifting off to sleep after a long, exhausting day.

The more time I spent with him, the easier it would become.

And I couldn't risk that. Not now.

Maybe not ever.

If my mother hadn't been lying about her vision, having Mal's baby might save the world. But if Mal's counter-prophecy was true, it might actually bring about the world's end instead.

Sleeping with him would kill him either way.

The only way to find out for sure what was true and what was a lie ended with Mal cold, stiff and dead.

Now that I had perspective on the situation, the memories of every time I'd begged him to fuck me felt worse every time I played them over in my head.

I might have enjoyed playing wife to Mal. I certainly hadn't been faking my desire for him. But in the process, I'd been acting like a selfish brat.

That was the other reason I had to keep away from him, actually.

Mal's self-control was impressive. Impeccable, even.

My own obviously left a lot to be desired.

"You headin' off already?" Mal stepped into the doorway of the bedroom as I rushed down the hall, still buttoning my blouse. His voice was still husky from sleep and his hair was messy. "It's barely sunrise."

I bit the inside of my cheek until I tasted iron as I tried to unnotice the fact that he wasn't wearing a shirt. Or pants. I'd woken up early to try to avoid the temptations that Mal's consistent morning erections created—but the thin boxers he wore didn't leave much to the imagination.

Not that I needed them to. I'd already gotten an up-close view of the thick, gorgeous cock that swelled beneath them.

I spent more hours of my days imagining Mal naked than I liked to admit.

"It's Saturday," I explained, quickly doing up the final buttons of my blouse as I noticed Mal's eyes wandering to my chest. "I've got the farmer's market. Need to set up our booth before people start to show up." I gave him the flash of a forced smile then headed for my boots at the entryway. I shoved my feet into them as fast as I could. "But I left some bacon keeping warm for you in the oven—burned, just the way you like. And there's fresh coffee in the pot too."

"Sweet of ya. Careful, though." Mal followed me down the hall and caught my elbow just as I nearly toppled over trying to lace my boots up. "Here. Lemme do that for ya."

He dropped to the floor and took my booted foot in his hand, then rested it on top of his knee so he could tie my laces.

It was kind. Charming. Exactly the kind of thing I'd always fantasized about a husband doing for me.

Unnecessary, but tender.

Which meant that, given our current situation, it was the worst possible thing he could have done.

True to his word, Mal hadn't tried to break my heart while Don and the others tried to find a way out of his deal with my mother.

I just wished that he would stop doing things that were making me melt for him so completely in the meantime.

“Thank you,” I said as he finished lacing me up. “I’ll see you tonight, okay?”

“Course you will.” Mal opened the door for me, then followed me out of it. “Lemme walk you to your truck.”

“You don’t have to do this,” I told him as we walked toward my pickup. “I’m already running late.”

“Course I do.” In front of the truck, Mal caught my wrist and pulled me against him with a playful smirk on his lips. His scent washed over me immediately—gunpowder and leather. Smokey and sweet. “If I didn’t, I couldn’t do this.”

He held me close as he lowered his lips toward mine. For a beautiful moment, I almost leaned in to meet his kiss.

But I knew *exactly* what a bad idea that was. My heart was already racing with excitement. Between my legs, I felt a flush that was becoming all too familiar whenever Mal was near.

If I kissed Mal now, I wouldn’t be able to bring myself to stop at *just* a kiss.

“I...don’t think that’s the best idea right now, all things considered,” I said gingerly as I pulled away. I patted his chest, then forced myself to take my hand off of it. Tugged my wrist out of his grip. Forced myself to back away.

The hurt on Mal’s face was apparent—at least, for the half-second that he let it show.

“Right. ‘Course not.” He nodded, then grabbed the door handle of the truck and yanked it open—a little harder than he needed to. As he held it open for me, his knuckles were white from his grip. “Best get a move-on. Like ya said, yer already late.”

ON MY WAY INTO TOWN, I finally called my sisters, one by one. They’d been ringing my phone off the hook ever since the wedding, but I’d put off explaining things to them with a text telling them that I was *sorting things out*.

Yeah, right.

Every time I reassessed my marriage, I felt like all I was doing was digging myself into a deeper ditch.

My sisters were varying levels of understanding when I explained the situation to them. Zara had been ready to call her nanny for the triplets and fly out immediately to give Mom a stern talking to—not that I thought it would do any good. Isla, Tanya and Dana all offered to send me new vibrators. Marie, on the other hand, only said she'd have a demon-sized coffin shipped here—"If he's as good-looking as you say he is, there's no way you're going to be able to hold out for long."

"You must be pretty pissed at Mom right now," Sonia guessed after I'd finished telling her about Mom's lies.

"Yeah, well, she's pretty pissed at me, too." I'd been dodging her calls as well—to little effect. "The shop's usually too full of customers for her to badger me there, but I've had to bury banishing spells along the property to keep her from showing up unannounced."

"Jeez—because nothing makes two newlyweds more eager to do the deed than random visits from the bride's mom."

"Right? Not that it's helped much," I admitted. "I keep seeing shapes moving around in the woods just beyond the property. I've counted as many as twelve some nights."

"You think she's sending the Seventh Daughters to spy on you?"

"Wouldn't be surprised."

"That does sound like her," Sonia said. "She always used to read our diaries too, you know. The way she laid into Marie when she found out all those missing love charms from her storeroom were actually ending up in the lockers of every boy on the football team..."

I laughed. "At least Marie was never hard up for a date."

I still remembered exactly what my diary had been filled with as a teenager: sappy, hopeful wishes for a husband who was kind and handsome and—well.

Exactly like Mal.

If our situation had only been a little less star-crossed, I would have actually been thanking Mom for forcing us together.

But things being what they were...

If she was waiting for me to shower her with praise for my carnival fire of a marriage, I hoped she wasn't holding her breath.

"I don't think you're wrong to be angry at Mom, Aves," Sonia said gently. "And you're probably not wrong—I wouldn't put it past her to lie if she thought it would get her what she wants. Just remember, there's

probably a reason she wants this, right? A good one. She wouldn't have forced you and Mal together otherwise, you know?"

"I know why she says she's doing it, anyway." I raked my fingers through my hair as I turned into the parking lot for the market. "But if Mom's prophecy says that our baby will save the world, and Mal's prophecy says it's going to help end it... Someone's lying. They can't both be right."

"And you're sure it's not Mal? If taking you to pound town will kill him, maybe he's just trying to lie his way out of doing the deed."

I sighed. "That crossed my mind at first. But I get the general feeling that Mal is, ah...*interested* in buying a ticket to pound town, if you know what I mean. Plus, I had the truth-cat on the table when he told me."

Sonia snorted. "That ugly blue one that Mom used to bring out when she interrogated us?"

"Yep. It didn't lower its paw for the entire conversation. I'm pretty sure he's not twisting the truth. Besides, if Mal wanted to get out of sleeping with me...wouldn't it be easier to just tell me he doesn't want to fuck me because he'd like to stay breathing?"

"Good point," Sonia agreed. "I feel for you, Aves. You're dealing with a lot—and it must be hard to figure out what to believe anymore."

"Yeah...pretty much, unfortunately. Anyway—I gotta go. I'm at the market now. Need to get the stall set up."

"You'll figure it out," Sonia assured me. "And if you need anything—and I mean *anything*—I'm only a phone call and a red-eye away. All of us are. I mean it."

"Thanks. I mean it, too." I made a kiss sound into the phone. "Love you."

"Love you too. Good luck at the market—and don't let those randy farmers get handsy with you. Remember, you're a married woman now."

I laughed as I hung up the phone.

A married woman—right. One who couldn't sleep with her husband without killing him. A married woman who couldn't get pregnant without worrying about ending the world.

BEFORE MOM GOT HER DIAGNOSIS, we used to run the booth at the farmer's market together. Above the counter, we sold flowers from her greenhouse—roses, lilies, irises and more. Below the counter—love potions,

protection charms, glamor spells and even an ill wish every once in a while, if Mom thought the person on the receiving end of it deserved the results.

Whether the majority of Greenriver actually believed in magic or not was something I'd never quite figured out. Some people wore their enchanted sigils openly and showed up at the booth every market. Others openly talked about my mother like she was some kind of certified nutjob. But over the course of the last two years, one by one, every person in town ended up coming to us eventually.

If they believed in any of it or not didn't really matter, I guessed. They came to us when they needed us either way.

It was still strange, running the booth without Mom. Though she was doing better now, she hadn't been back since she'd gotten her biopsy results. Even now, as I stewed in the hurt of her manipulations and the embarrassment of falling for them, there was an emptiness here in her absence.

This had been our thing for so long—seventh daughter and seventh daughter. Side by side, selling bouquets and arrangements and talismans and charms. This had been *us*.

But now, I wasn't even sure that I wanted to stay in Greenriver at all for much longer. So much had happened since my wedding night. So much had happened in general—most of it, things I didn't even remember.

Angels and demons. Heaven and Hell. Mal—so much of my past with Mal. It had all been taken from me, and that was *before* I'd been strong-armed into our current predicament.

Maybe it would be nice to get away from it all for a while. Run off to Hong Kong or New York like my sisters had, or finally take that trip to Vermont to see Bea and Abbie and Joan. I could even try to find Evie again. Rekindle our lost friendship and just...forget about the apocalypse. Forget about my responsibilities. Leave all of this behind.

Maybe running the booth today was the beginning of the end.

"You look worried today, Ava."

I looked up from the wreath of sunflowers I'd been weaving while I was between customers to find Raph staring down at me. He was probably at least twenty years older than me, with dark, graying hair and broad shoulders and whiskey-colored eyes.

His age didn't make him any less handsome. Ever since he'd purchased the Miller farm last year, plenty of the single women in town had their eyes on him. I suspected that several of the love potions I'd sold ever since he'd come to town had ended up in pies left on his doorstep and glasses of sweet tea served to him on front porches.

If so, none of them had ever taken root. The love potions we sold didn't force people's hearts one way or another—only opened the heart to the potential for romance. Raph was, as far as I knew, still single.

Under his gaze, something slick and icky in my stomach churned.

The way he was looking at me right now suggested he might be looking to change that.

If so, he was barking up *entirely* the wrong tree.

"Are you?" he asked as I failed to come up with anything to say back to him. "Worried?"

"Just tired," I said, pumping the cheer into my voice and forcing a fake smile on my lips. "How're you, Raph? Can I help you with anything today?"

"I'm fine. Just thought I might buy a flower for a pretty lady." He brushed his fingers over the bucket of carnations, still staring at me. "Which are your favorites?"

"Oh, I like them all," I said immediately. Best to nip this in the bud—and quick. "These ones are looking especially fresh today. And I hear Becky Owens *adores* irises."

I made sure to flash my ring at him as I reached for an iris stem. The black diamonds in it were big enough and sparkly enough, it wasn't something he could easily miss.

"I'll take all of them," Raph said, pulling out his wallet. "Actually—why don't you let me buy you out?"

"That's...very generous of you, Raph. But I've got a lot of stock left." I gestured to the huge spread of flowers that still surrounded the booth. "Even with a bulk discount, it would cost a small fortune."

"Lucky me." Raph pulled a fat stack of hundreds from his wallet and waved them at me. "I came prepared. Besides—you can make it up to me by buying us breakfast when we finish packing up. The Junction Cafe's only a couple of blocks away. I hear their pancakes are divine."

"That's a sweet offer." My paste-on smile was souring quickly. I had to fight extra hard to keep pumping sweetness into it now. "But I'm actually

married, Raph.”

I held up my hand again so he could see the ring—in a way he couldn’t ignore this time.

“Ah.” Raph’s shoulders slumped slightly with clear disappointment. “That must have happened fast. The paper didn’t say—”

“It wasn’t in the paper.” *Keep smiling, Ava. Just. Keep. Smiling.* “And it did happen fast. But you know how it is—when you love someone, sometimes you just can’t wait.”

Love. It was the first time I’d said it about Mal. I still didn’t know that I meant it—how could I?

According to Mal—and as verified by the truth-cat—we’d been in love before. *Real* love. No deceptions. No arm-twisting. An actual, honest-to-goodness romance—one that I still couldn’t remember.

I felt things for Mal. Even as I tried to push him away, I was drawn to him with an intensity that was almost impossible to ignore.

But did those feelings even compare to what I’d felt for him before we’d lost each other?

It was hard to say.

Not that it was important right now.

As far as Raph needed to know, I was completely smitten with my husband. Head over heels, with no chance of being tempted away.

“In that case...congratulations, Ava. I wish you all the happiness in the world.” The look on Raph’s face suggested that he didn’t mean it. At all. He reached into his wallet again, this time pulling out a card. He took a pen from my booth and scrawled something on the back of it. “But you should take my number anyway. If you ever need to talk, just call.”

He held the card out to me, but I didn’t take it. Not that Raph seemed to care.

He reached over the table and tucked it into my bag instead.

“New marriages can go south quickly,” he explained. “You never know when you might need a friend to swoop in.”

Apparently, Raph was the kind of guy who wasn’t aware of how to take a *no, thanks*.

“I appreciate your concern, Raph.” My smile remained, but it was colder now. So was my voice—polite, but touched by ice. “I really need to get back to work, though. I think it would be best if you moved along.”

“Do you?” Raph flashed me his fat stack of money again. “I’m a paying customer, after all—and I wasn’t kidding about buying you out.”

I stared at him for a moment, feeling my temper out. It was currently simmering at a slow boil, which meant I was mere seconds away from losing it at him completely. If I opened my mouth to tell him off, there was no telling what might come out.

But before I had a chance to find out, a thick-fingered hand came down on Raph’s shoulder as a massive man appeared behind him.

“The lady said leave.” The newcomer had a deep, raspy voice like a baseball bat driven through with rusty nails. It made the little hairs on my arms stand on end just listening to it—and judging by the way all the color had just drained from Raph’s face, he felt it too.

Without another word, Raph skulked off, casting a look of annoyance behind him.

I let out a breath of relief when he was gone.

Good riddance.

“Thank you,” I told the big guy who’d just saved me the effort of issuing a grade-A ass chewing. The guy was bald and twice as big as any other man I’d ever met. Even Mal would probably have to crane his neck to look this man in the eyes. He wore a bulky leather jacket. Over his heart, a patch had been stitched next to the lapel. It read *NASTY DOG*. Yikes. Beneath it was a second patch, emblazoned with the image of a hook. “Would you, um...would you like to buy a flower?”

I watched his dark, close-set eyes wander across the table before they settled on the Eglantine roses. They were from the same clearing Mal had been plundering in the woods.

“These are pretty,” he boomed as he picked one up. As he stared down at it, his lips curled into an almost sentimental smile. “How much?”

“Have it,” I encouraged him. There was something wrong with this guy—Nasty Dog, if that was his name. I was grateful for his presence, but I knew I’d probably be more comfortable when he took his leave. “It’s on the house.”

IT WAS late afternoon by the time I finally got back from the cottage. I was starving. After I finished unpacking the truck, I grabbed my purse and headed into the kitchen to throw something quick together for lunch.

I found Mal sitting at the table. He raised his gaze to me as I came in, then quickly got up from his chair.

“Hey, darlin’.” His voice sounded emptier than usual. His skin looked paler, too. “Sorry. Was just headin’ out.”

I bit my lip as I watched him slip past me. He was obviously upset—probably from our awkward exchange this morning. My heart contracted hard, twinging with regret.

I’d wanted to kiss him this morning. I’d wanted...so, so much more than just a kiss, for that matter.

Could he really not see that?

Mal didn’t miss much—but if he really thought I didn’t want to be close to him, he was less observant than I thought.

“Mal, wait just a—” I turned quickly, trying to catch his arm before he got too far away. But in the process, I completely forgot that I was holding my purse.

It sailed out of my grasp. I practically launched it at him. When it hit the floor, all of its contents spilled out and scattered. Chapstick, old receipts, loose coins, sunglasses—the whole shebang.

“Shit,” I swore, dropping to my knees. I dove on the rolling coins before they slipped into the cracks between the floorboards. “Sorry.”

“Yer all right.” Mal dropped down too, helping me. “Here, let me...”

His words trailed off on a strange, falling tone. When I looked over at him, his face had fallen as well.

In his hand, he held a card. It took me a second to recognize it—after all, I’d barely glanced at it when Raph had shoved it into my bag.

“What in hell’s name is this?” Mal held it up to me with a dark look in his eyes. His voice was ragged and low.

“It’s nothing,” I said immediately. “Just—”

“*Pancakes at the Junction anytime you want.*” Mal read the words Raph had written on the back of the card with a snarl. “*My treat.*” His eyes met mine. His blues were burning hot and furious. “Don’t look like nothin’, Ava. Looks like a whole lotta somethin’ to me.”

MAL

The rage bristling through me was almost a surprise. It tore through my chest and ravaged my every cell like loosed hellfire, hungry to burn up everything in its path.

I'd never been jealous before. Not with Ava. She'd never given me any reason to be.

Men had made passes at her in the past, sure. Looking the way she did, it was inevitable. Every asshole who set eyes on her had always wanted a piece. But even before she'd lost her memories of me, she'd never made me question how she'd felt.

She'd always, *always* been mine.

"You don't know what you're talking about," Ava insisted.

From her position on the floor, she stared up at me with wide eyes and seriousness in her gaze. Her back was arched and her round, pert ass was pointed upward in a way that stirred need in me, even in spite of how pissed I was.

It was a shame. No woman had any business looking so damn good on her hands and knees.

Especially not one who belonged to me. One who I could never truly claim.

"Can't fuck the husband waiting for you back at home, so you've started lookin' elsewhere, huh?" I stepped on the Chapstick she'd been reaching for, pinning it beneath my boot against the floor.

“Oh, yes. That’s it. My poor, neglected pussy is just aching so bad for a man to have his wicked way with it.” She shoved my boot aside—with far more ease than normal, I noticed—and snatched the Chapstick from beneath it. “Now, I have no choice but to lift my skirts for a stack of flapjacks. Get over yourself, Mal. I’m not that cheap.”

“Cheap enough to go takin’ calling cards from other men, apparently.” I drew back, edging closer to the wall. I was feeling lightheaded. Had been, on and off, ever since this morning.

Something was wrong, and I knew it. But not more wrong than the thought of Ava sharing a meal with another man.

“I didn’t take it from him,” Ava snapped. “He forced it on me.”

“Oh, so that’s how you like it, huh? Can’t say no to some charming stranger if he never gives you a chance.”

“I *did* tell him no. He put his stupid fucking card in my purse anyway. And he’s not a stranger.”

“Reassuring.”

“He’s just Raph, Mal. He’s older and lonely and owns a farm here in Greenriver. Buys flowers from my stall sometimes. That’s all.”

I opened my mouth to snap something else at her—but the name from her lips stopped me.

Raph.

I turned the card over and glanced down at the name on it. *Raph Enoch*. In an instant, my blood turned from fire to ice.

Ava was right on at least one point. Raph was no stranger.

Without her memories of the past, he might’ve fooled her with this new fake name of his. But he wasn’t fooling me.

“This man ain’t no farmer.” I threw the card aside. “And he wants a hell of a lot more from you than breakfast.”

“Sure, Mal. I’m perfectly aware you’ve already decided I was ready to lay it all out on the table for him.” She collected the last of her spilled items and tucked them away into her purse. “If you think so little of me, I’m not sure why you even care.”

Ava moved to rise. She planned to run off to the bedroom and leave me out here to seethe, no doubt.

But I wasn’t having any of that.

Especially not now.

“No. You stay right there, darlin’.” I placed a hand on her shoulder and stared down at her with steel in my gaze. “On your fuckin’ knees.”

“So that’s how *you* like it, huh? With me on my knees where I belong?” Ava reached up to push my hand off of her, but as soon as I made contact with her body, I found strength returning. She didn’t find it quite so easy to shove me away this time.

“Maybe I do reckon you belong on your knees,” I growled. She may not have remembered it, but she’d been on her knees for me plenty of times before. “Shoulda put you in your place a long fuckin’ time ago.”

“Get your hands off me.” She continued to try and pry my fingers away from her slender shoulder, but they didn’t budge. “You don’t get to insult me like that then order me around, Mal.”

“Don’t I?” I held firm. What I was about to say next was important. I wanted her hanging onto my every word. “The man’s an angel, Ava. Raphael. And if he’s here, he knows exactly who you are and exactly who you belong to. The rest of Heaven’s probably bearing down on Greenriver as we speak.”

Ava’s eyes widened. Her shoulders slumped beneath my hand as she took that information in.

“Fuck,” she swore. Her entire demeanor changed in an instant. All that fire she’d been spitting at me just a moment ago was replaced with nerves and fear. “Mal... I told him we were married. I told him your *name*! Are we in danger? Do we need to leave?”

“The Malebranche will deal with any angels that come around these parts,” I assured her. “We’re stayin’ put.”

“The Malebranche?”

“My men. Demons from my little slice of Hell. I’ve stationed them ‘round Greenriver in case somethin’ like this happened.” My lips curled in a snarl. My strength was coming back to me, but it wasn’t driving out my fury. “Just didn’t think you’d go wanderin’ right into the palm of Heaven’s hands.”

“Is *that* who that was?” A blush rose to Ava’s cheeks as she blinked up at me. “Some big, burly biker scared Raph away from the stall after I’d turned him down. I think the name on his jacket was...Nasty Dog.”

“Cagnazzo,” I confirmed. “Yeah. He’s one of mine.”

“So the angels know about us, you don’t trust me, and you told your big, ugly flying monkeys to follow me around?” Ava lowered her gaze to

the floor. Her cheeks were bright red now, like they'd been smacked raw by some unseen hand of embarrassment. "Great."

"I told them to watch over you when I couldn't. Now, we know I was right to." My grip on her shoulder tightened as she tried to rise again. "And I told *you* to stay on your knees."

"Why?" she spat, still staring at the floor. "So you can lord it over me, how stupid I was to spill how *happy* I am with you to some secret angel?"

"No." I reached for my belt. "So I can remind you who you belong to. Once and for all."

Ava's eyes tracked the movements of my fingers as I loosed the leather from the buckle. I caught a hungry flicker of her wet, pink tongue in the corner of her lips before she managed to remember herself.

"You're not that crude, Mal. And I'm not that desperate."

"Aren't you?" I took her jaw in my hand and pushed my thumb against her lower lip. As I dragged it downward, she let out a shaky breath. "Coulda fooled me."

"No," she said again, pulling back from my touch. "I'm not."

But as soon as I pushed my thumb into her mouth, those pretty lips of hers were already singing a different tune. She lifted her chin and closed her eyes. Her lips wrapped around my thumb tight as she sucked it wet for me.

For a moment of pure beauty, her expression dissipated into one far sweeter than her glare.

"You don't know the first thing about desperate, darlin'." I popped my thumb from her mouth and undid the button of my jeans. I made quick work of the zipper right after as I closed the gap between her mouth and my hips. "But you're about to."

I pushed my jeans down and reached into my boxers, taking my cock into my fist. When I drew it out, I watched with pleasure as Ava's eyes went wide. Her lips fell open softly. Her breath hitched in her throat.

"Oh," she whispered. "It's...*oh*."

"It's all yours, darlin'. Just like your mouth's all mine." I squeezed my fist around it, stroking it slowly so she could watch exactly how far my hand had to travel to get from base to tip. "All you gotta do is beg for it."

"Beg..." Gently, she frowned. It was cute—her cheeks were still red with embarrassment, and her expression was just short of a pout. "Mal, I said I was sorry. Don't be mean."

“If I was bein’ mean, I’d be sittin’ in an armchair in the living room right now with you across my lap.” I worked my fist back down to the base of my cock to hold its weight, then used the other fist to work the upper half. There was a glistening pearl of precum already trembling at my tip. Ava’s gaze zeroed in on it immediately. “I’d have your skirts up around your waist and my hand comin’ down on that round, firm ass of yours until it was colored as bright as your cheeks are right now.”

“Mal...you wouldn’t.” She tore her eyes away from my cock to stare up at me pleadingly. “You’d *spank* me? Just for...for talking to another man?”

“Maybe I would. Maybe I don’t want anyone else so much as lookin’ at you. No one but me.” Was it impractical? Sure. But compared to the thought of some fucking *angel* sniffing around her at the farmer’s market while she was working her stall... Fuck. I’d lock her in a tower if I had to. I’d chain her to the fucking bed. “You’re mine, Ava. My mate. My wife. So yes—either you beg me for the pleasure of suckin’ my cock right now, or I take you over my knee and I mark you in my own way. At this point, don’t really care which.”

Her gaze dropped back to my cock. She licked her lips, studying it with a mounting hunger rising up in her pretty green eyes. I could see all the wheels turning in her mind—a spanking, or my cock down her throat.

She could pretend all she liked—but I knew from our past that she wasn’t being forced to pick between the lesser of two evils right now.

She was trying to decide which option made her cunt burn with need more.

“Okay,” she finally breathed. Her gaze locked on mine again. “Please, Mal. I want to suck your cock.”

I snorted and shook my head, still stroking myself off. “Oh, no, sweetheart. I didn’t ask what you wanted. I told you to beg—and I wanna hear it in your voice exactly how much you fuckin’ mean it.”

“*Please*, Mal,” she repeated, forming the words with extra emphasis on her full, pouting lips. “I—I *do* want it. I *do* mean it. Give it to me.” Tentatively, she reached for it. Her delicate little hands looked even smaller next to its thickness. “*Please*.”

“No.” I stared at her hand until she withered and dropped it. “Hands at your sides. I didn’t say ask for it. I didn’t say take. I said *beg*.”

“I don’t know how!” she whined with annoyance. “I want you, you stupid bastard! I’ve wanted you all this time, and I haven’t been able to have you, and now you’re...you’re teasing me with it! Torturing me! It’s not *fair*.”

“That’s right. It ain’t fuckin’ fair.” She could say that again. Her frustration was written all over her face, and it only made my cock even harder in my hands. That was my Ava, all right. A feisty little spitfire, through and through. “Every mornin’, I wake up so stiff for you, feels like I don’t have a drop of blood anywhere else in my veins. Every time I smell wet cunt on you, my body screams at me to take and rut and use and own, and there ain’t fuck-all I can do about it. It ain’t fair, and life ain’t fair. Question is, what’re you gonna do about it?”

“I’m going to please you,” she said—and she said it like she meant it, too. “I’m going to show you exactly how good I can make you feel. Please, Mal—give me your cock. Even just a taste...”

She spread her knees further apart and worked a hand beneath her skirt. After a moment, her scent wafted up to me. Honey and musk. Pure desire. *Fuck*.

“That’s right, darlin’. Touch yourself for me.” I repositioned my cock so the tip was pointing straight at her mouth. “Stick out your tongue. I’ll give you a taste—but you gotta prove to me you deserve more.”

Slowly, Ava opened her mouth. Her soft pink tongue slipped out from between her lips. I placed my cock on it and watched her eyes close as I slicked my precum across her taste buds.

She sighed with delight.

“Now. Suck it,” I ordered.

Eagerly, she pulled her tongue back, dragging my cock into her mouth along with it.

Goddamn. I’d almost forgotten how good she was at this. The heat of her mouth was far too inviting. The way her cheeks hollowed as she sucked me—enough to make my balls ache for more.

I grabbed hold of the back of her head and jerked her forward. She’d earned far more than just the tip. I thrust my cock all the way to the back of her throat, just slowly enough to give her time to get used my thickness. I didn’t want her gagging on me—at least, not quite yet.

Ava maintained the suction as she adjusted to how full her mouth was. She whimpered as I forced myself just shy of too deep—then, I pulled my

hips back so I could press into her all over again.

Her pillowy lips latched tight around my shaft. Her saliva coated me now, removing all friction. The tension, the wetness, the heat...it was almost as good as fucking her cunt.

Almost.

I clenched my jaw as I worked my cock in and out of her mouth. I would've liked nothing more than to ravage her throat until she was gasping, then shove her onto her back so I could rut her on the floor. Like an animal. Like a beast.

But I knew that wasn't in the cards. For now, I'd have to settle for using her mouth instead—and I'd be damned if I didn't use it well.

"Push your fingers into your cunt," I growled at her. "I wanna hear you comin' for me by the time I take your throat."

A shift of the hand beneath her skirt and a moan told me that she'd done just as I'd asked. The vibrations reverberated around my cock as she stroked the underside of my dick lovingly with her tongue. I gave her another inch of me as I continued to claim her. She gulped it down and lunged forward, taking two more inches where I'd only offered her the one.

She was getting bold. Greedier than ever.

Perfect.

"Such a needy little slut." She moaned extra hard at that word, *slut*. Like it was more than an insult—like it was something she wanted to claim and prove and own. "You want more?"

"*Mm-hmm!*" she whined, nodding quickly.

"Take it, then. Wanna see you swallow up my whole fuckin' cock." I gave another thrust of my hips. This one was firm enough, pretty soon I could feel my tip bottom out against the back of her throat. "That's it, darlin'. Gulp it down. Why dontcha show me exactly how much of a slut you really are."

Ava swallowed, then winced as she gagged. That didn't stop her, though. She extended her tongue and opened her throat for me. She struggled—and Christ alive, wasn't that a beautiful sight?--but she succeeded.

My cock plunged down her throat. Now, when she choked on me, she massaged my tip with every gag.

I took her rough and slow, giving her just enough time to gasp for air every time I pulled my hips back before I claimed her all over again.

“You know who you belong to now, Ava? Or do I need to make it a little more clear?” I took the side of her face in the palm of my hand and ran my thumb over her cheekbone.

She could only whimper in response. I liked the sound of that.

Maybe a little too much.

“Oughta cum on your pretty face. March you around town with my seed dripping down your cheeks, so every man in Greenriver knows exactly who owns you.” My breath was getting heavy. My balls were sore with need for release. “Oughta cum on your tits and across your belly. Or maybe I spread your thighs and shoot all over your hot, wet cunt, huh?”

Another whimper as I continued to fuck her throat like she was my personal plaything. This one sounded like a *please*.

“You’re mine,” I growled, pushing deeper still. “You’re all fuckin’ mine. I married you. I gave up my goddamn immortality for you. And someday, Ava—someday, I’ll fuckin’ breed you like the cock-hungry little bitch you are.”

She let out a high, muffled cry around my dick as her orgasm hit. Her body shook with it and her tongue slid down the bottom of my cock onto my balls, giving me just enough room to thrust all the way down her perfect throat.

In an instant, my balls tensed tight. The cum churning in them swelled up and burst forth through my tip, gushing out over Ava’s hungry tongue.

“That’s right, darlin’. Swallow my seed.” I took the back of her head in my hand and held her in place. The sear of pleasure coursing through me was strong enough to make me want to close my eyes—but I didn’t dare. I was too obsessed with how good she looked with my cock between her lips, struggling to keep the whole mouthful of cum from dripping out. “Take it. Every fuckin’ drop.”

She held my gaze as she gulped it down. Even when she was finished, she kept sucking me, teasing any remaining cum from out of my tip with her tongue.

I was more sensitive than ever now. The sensation nearly brought me to my knees as well.

“Good girl,” I panted, pulling her head back. My cock slipped out of her mouth with a satisfying *pop!* “Such a good girl.”

“Mal...thank you. I needed that,” she whispered. Her eyes were glossy wet as she stared up at me. Teardrops trickled down from them with every blink. “I needed *you*.”

I dropped down on the floor next to her and took her into my arms. Her tears were warm against my thumb as I wiped them away.

“I needed you too, darlin’. And you were perfect,” I assured her. “You always are.”

“And you’re looking better than you have all week.” Ava ran her fingers up the side of my cheek, into my hair. She smiled like the look of me pleased her. “Your color’s coming back and everything. Guess we both needed that, huh?”

“Me more than you, darlin’.” I wrapped an arm around her back and drew her body to mine. “Earlier, when you were on your knees and I put my hand on your shoulder... Dunno what was wrong with me before that, exactly. But I was feelin’ weak. Havin’ my hands on ya, then...” I chuckled. “Having yer pretty mouth around my cock, especially. It made me better.”

“I always feel better when I’m close to you, too.” Ava tucked her knees to the side and cuddled up against my chest. “We’re good for each other like that.”

“A little too good, maybe.” I buried my nose in her hair and breathed in her scent. Rosy and sweet. “I don’t just mean you made me feel better, darlin’. I mean I felt sick before I touched ya. Lightheaded and achin’ and spent. Touchin’ you—havin’ you--you made me better than better. You made me well again.”

“Do you think...maybe it’s got something to do with whatever Mom did when she bound you to me?” Ava glanced up from beneath my chin. “Making you ill if you don’t fulfill your end of your agreement with her in a timely fashion...” She sighed. “It does sound like something she would do.”

“I wouldn’t put it past her either.” I closed my eyes and rested my chin on the crown of her head. “But this...if you’re keen on keepin’ it up, anyway...”

Ava pulled back to look me in the eyes.

“Of course I am,” she said immediately. A tiny, exasperated laugh left her lips. “You’re not the only one who enjoyed that, Mal. I like having your cock in my mouth too, you know.”

I smiled. "That so?"

"It is." She swatted at my chest and laughed again. "As if you didn't notice."

"Nah. I did." I caught her wrist and pulled her back to me again. "Just wanted to hear you say it again."

"Then yes, Mal. I like having your big, thick cock in my hot, wet mouth." She nuzzled my chest with her nose. "A lot. I'd like to do it again."

"Keep talkin' like that and you might have to."

Just at her words, my cock was already stiffening again. There were a dozen different things I wanted to do to Ava next—and most of them would be a hell of a lot better if we got up off the floor.

I released her from my embrace so I could rise to my feet, then offered her my hand.

"So this is...a new arrangement, then?" she asked as I pulled her up. "We don't have sex, but..."

"We get as close to fuckin' as we can get without actually doin' the deed." I gave a small nod. "Seems crazy enough that it just might work."

"I'm not exactly...opposed to that," Ava admitted, curling her fingers around my belt.

"Glad to hear it." I cupped her cheek in my hand and relished the way she leaned into my touch. "Neither am I."

"Do you think it will be enough?"

"Nothin' with you is ever enough, darlin." I'd had a hundred lifetimes with this woman. A thousand more, and I knew I still wouldn't be satisfied. "But I'm doin' better already. See?"

I guided her hand to the lap of my jeans and pressed it firmly to the hard length of my cock beneath the denim.

"Yes," she said with a wry smile. "I suppose you are."

"It's ain't a long-term solution," I warned her. "But maybe it's the start of one."

"In that case..." Ava's eyes glimmered with suggestion as they flicked toward the bedroom down the hall, guiding my gaze.

I grinned, dropped down, and threw her over my shoulder. She yelped and laughed, pounding playfully against my back as I carried her off to bed.

“I like where your head’s at,” I told her. “And here in a minute or so, I reckon you’re gonna like where I put mine, too.”

AVA

For the two weeks that followed our new agreement, there were good days...and there were bad ones.

Every time Mal and I fooled around—in bed, in the garden, in the stables, even in the bed of my truck once—he seemed to get better. The color came back to his cheeks. His strength returned. In the afterglow of our pleasure, he seemed like he was back to his old self again.

But every time I enjoyed his mouth on my pussy, his cock between my lips, the sweat and firmness and heat of his body against mine...

With every encounter, it was getting harder and harder for us to stop ourselves from taking things further. Mal nearly broke down and fucked me more times than I could count. By the end of the week, we'd gotten so close to making love out of pure, unadulterated need that we were only coming to our senses the moment before Mal pressed his cock into me.

It was maddening.

It was *bullshit*.

Not just because we wanted each other so badly...

But also because every time we tempted fate and gave ourselves over to each other, it was taking less and less time for Mal to start looking worse for wear again.

At the beginning of the first week, all it had taken to bring Mal's vitality back for a few days was an enthusiastic blowjob or an hour

between my legs, making me come against his tongue. But that grace period had quickly shortened from days of good health to mere hours.

It felt like a catch-22. The more we gave each other, the more we wanted. The more we wanted, the more Mal needed.

I was watching Mal waste away before my very eyes every time we failed to give into our desires.

But as soon as those desires were fully, *properly* fulfilled...

He'd be dead.

I was finally forced to say the words we'd both been thinking as Mal disentangled himself from our sheets that Sunday morning. We'd only been in bed cuddling for half an hour after making each other come—but when Mal stood up to grab us some water, his knees gave out. He had to catch himself on the bedpost to keep from falling to the floor.

His skin was more ashen than ever—and from the glaze over his deep blue eyes, I knew he felt every bit as weak as he looked.

“Mal...” I rose immediately and dropped my shoulder beneath his so he could lean on me. Just like I had right before we'd said our vows that fateful night—only this time, he didn't seem to perk up from my presence. He only braced himself against me as he caught his breath. “You're getting worse.”

“I know, darlin'.” He shook his head and grunted as he wrapped his arms around my body and forced his legs to hold his weight. Even then, he didn't seem capable of pulling himself up to his full height. He stayed hunched, with his forehead resting against mine. “I fuckin' know.”

“Here. Get back in bed.” I guided him back to the edge of the mattress, and begrudgingly, he let me. I made a point of fluffing his pillows for him before I tucked him back in. “I'll go get the water. You stay here and rest.”

“Ava...” He grabbed my hand before I could move to the door. When he squeezed my fingers, his grip was missing its usual strength. His palm was clammy and cold against mine. “We ain't gonna be able to keep this up forever. You know that, right?”

“I know.” I bent over and pressed a kiss to his forehead. Unlike his palms, it was burning up and beaded with sweat. “But Don and the others are still looking for a way out of this for us. They're going to find it.”

I believed it. I had to. But even so, every day when I called Bea and Joan for updates, they sounded grimmer about our prospects. The bond

that Mal and I had was too strong to break now—and whatever spell my mother had Mal under was even stronger.

I still hadn't really spoken to her since the night that she'd made Mal my husband and me, his wife. With Mal in his current condition, I'd let her know that I was taking my vacation days from the flower shop. She'd tried to ask me why, but even though I hadn't answered...from the look on her face, I knew that she was aware of exactly what was wrong.

I was falling in love with Mal again. The more I thought about it, the more I felt it was true.

If I'd thought Mom would be willing to help us at all, I would have gone to her already. But she'd tricked Mal, lied to me, and doomed us both to the half-life we were currently forced to live. She'd gotten us into this mess.

If she'd wanted to make it up to us, she would have given us a way out of it.

But she hadn't offered her assistance, and so I hadn't asked.

When I came back to bed with a pitcher of cold water from the fridge and two glasses, Mal's eyes were closed. My breath caught in my chest at the sight of him.

His skin was dull. His hair was damp with sweat. I nearly dropped the pitcher as I rushed over to him—he didn't look like he was breathing.

"Mal," I pleaded as I dropped to my knees by his bedside. I set the pitcher and glasses aside so I could pat his cheek and check his pulse. "Mal—please—don't be—"

"Chrissakes, darlin'," he muttered, eyes still closed. "Calm down. I ain't dead yet."

I pressed my fingers against his neck anyway and laid my ear to his chest, searching for a heartbeat. I found it—but it was faint and slow.

This was killing him. I could see it, plain as day. It had only happened bit by bit at first, like forming a snowball. But now that it had enough momentum, I could feel Mal's life rolling away rapidly—faster now than I could possibly find a way to fix.

"You're dying, Mal." Saying it out loud hurt—but it was just admitting what I'd suspected for days now. What I'd feared.

Mal's head bobbed in a stiff, weak nod. "I know, darlin'. I know."

"So what do we do?" I took his hand in mine and squeezed it tight. His fingers were like ice. "I could talk to my mother—I could ask her if there

isn't some kind of way out of this. Maybe—"

"She ain't gonna help us, sugar. If you thought she would, ya woulda talked to her already."

He was right, of course.

But that didn't mean I was giving up hope just yet.

I *couldn't*.

Giving up meant admitting that I was going to lose Mal. Not even for the first time.

I still couldn't remember the last time I'd lost Mal.

I wasn't going to do it again.

"We can try," I told him, shifting to my feet once more. "We *have* to try. I'll go now—just let me get my boots on."

I gave Mal a quick kiss on the lips, then tried to move away. The quicker I could get hold of Mom, the quicker I could ask her for her help. I'd beg if I had to. I wasn't above that.

If it meant keeping Mal here—*alive*—I wasn't sure I was above anything now.

But as I pulled away, Mal held my hand tight.

With what must have been all the strength he could muster, he tugged me back.

"Don't go," he murmured. His eyes opened just a crack—a thin sliver of deep, dark blue. "Stay with me, darlin'. Want you close."

"Oh. You mean..." Gently, I placed myself on the edge of the bed. Over the blankets, I stroked my hand over Mal's lap. His cock rose for me immediately. His eyes shot open—brighter. *Alive. Alive.*

But apparently, more blowjobs wasn't what Mal had in mind.

He clenched his jaw and let out a growl.

"No, darlin'. As much as I'd like that...you know as well as I do that's only a short-term fix. In the end...does more harm than it does good, don't it?" He grunted as he shifted his body away from mine, making more room on the mattress. "Just, c'mere. Let me hold ya for a while longer."

"But, Mal..." Being cuddled in Mal's arms was one of the best feelings in the entire world. Even now, it was a difficult thing to resist. "Every minute we don't act is a minute we lose. You know you don't really start to get better again until—"

"Oh, I know," he assured me. "But this is what I want right now. Are ya really gonna deny a dyin' man his wish?"

“No,” I grumbled, setting the glass of water aside and slipping beneath the sheets next to him again. “I suppose not.”

I settled into Mal’s arms—a familiar place for me now. A comfortable place, too.

Being close to him like this was the greatest comfort I’d ever known.

I rested my head on his bare chest and he wrapped his arm around me. He still felt cold—but maybe I could give him a little of my body heat. Keep him warm.

It was as good of a solution as any we had right now, at least.

“Still remember the first time I ever laid eyes on ya, y’know.” His voice was a low rumble in the shell of my ear.

“In this life, you mean? Or...in general?” My reincarnations and Mal’s agelessness meant that he must’ve met—and remet me—hundreds of times.

“Oh, the first time in general was a...a doozy.” He snorted softly—the closest thing he could manage to a laugh. “Ya’ve always got some kinda magic, see. The first time ever, though...buncha villagers had ya tied to a stake when I found ya. Looked like they were fixin’ to burn you as a witch.”

“And you saved me, I take it?”

“Sure did. I might’ve been a demon back then, but it hardly seemed right to let such a lovely thing as you go up in smoke.”

“Gentlemanly of you,” I said fondly, stroking his chest.

“Not really,” Mal admitted. With what looked like far too much effort, he lifted his hand and placed it over mine. “I figured you might, ah...reward me for my troubles.”

I smirked against him. “Were you right?”

“Oh, very much so. You weren’t too partial to the idea of owin’ me anything—and when you don’t have a curse hangin’ over yer head, you can be awful obligin’.”

“Have I not been *obligin’* to you this time around?” I teased. “Even with the curse, if we were in love before this, we must have at least, you know. Fooled around a little, right?”

“Oh, we did.” Mal sighed contentedly. “Gloriously. But it took ya a while to get up the courage to even talk to me this time around.”

A laugh burst from my lips unexpectedly. “*Really?* That...doesn’t sound much like me.”

At all, in fact. I couldn't remember the last time I'd struggled to talk to a guy I liked. Mal was handsome, but even so, I'd never found myself feeling silently shy around him.

Then again, I'd gone into this marriage with certain...intentions.

There wasn't a lot of room for shyness when you were marrying a demon you were planning to immediately fuck—and ultimately kill.

"Then the angels musta took more than just your memories of me, Heaven and Hell," Mal said. "First time I saw you...your friend Evie had just gotten engaged."

"To Lucifer, right? Luke."

"Naw—that came later. It was to...ah, shit. What was his name? Adam, I think. Somethin' the angels arranged to try to keep Evie and Luke apart."

"Sounds like the angels failed, then." When Mal had spoken of Evie and Luke before, he'd said they already had a little girl together.

"Oh, very much so. I, ah...might've had a hand in that. When we found out what the angels were up to, I came up to Earth and befriended the groom. Just to keep an eye on things." I heard the hint of a smile in Mal's voice as he recounted the tale. "Never suspected I'd get my first glimpse of you in the process."

"Where was it?" I asked, deeply curious.

I was curious about all of it, really—Mal, the mysterious Evie...an entire chunk of my past that I had no way of getting back.

"Fancy-ass brunch place in Los Angeles," Mal said. "We groomsmen were just meetin' you bridesmaids for the first time. You came in wearin' a pretty little sundress and the biggest smile I'd ever seen—at least, until you caught sight of *me*."

"I highly doubt seeing a man who looks as good as *you* was the kind of thing that could wipe a smile from my face, handsome." I placed a kiss on his chest, and Mal hummed contentedly.

"You looked like I'd just stolen all the breath outta yer lungs from all the way across the room, darlin'." Mal turned his head and buried his nose in my hair, creating a little cave of humidity where his breath collected in my waves. "Like I'd just turned your whole world upside down from bein' near."

"Now *that* I can imagine," I said with a laugh. I pushed myself up out of Mal's arms so I could admire him—that square jawline and handsome

face that had, apparently, rendered me entirely useless at just a glance. “My world’s definitely upside down now—and you *do* have a certain knack for taking my breath away.”

I smiled down at him, happy to see a little color returning to his cheeks. Maybe it wasn’t the foreplay that was keeping him alive after all. Maybe it was just...being close. Being together.

Being...

My smile flickered, then strengthened. If I was right—if this was really helping—then what I was about to say next surely couldn’t hurt.

Most of all because I meant it.

Between Mal and me, there was no space or time for lies.

“I love you, Mal.” I smoothed his hair back and relished the way his eyes lit up at my words. “I really do. I might not remember falling in love with you before...but all these weeks together have given me plenty of reasons to love you now.”

“Mm. Music to my ears, darlin’.” He smiled back at me and, with a sigh, raised his hand up to cup my cheek. “You already know that I lo—”

Mal coughed, then coughed again, cutting off his words.

I frowned as he cleared his throat and did his best to catch his breath.

That settled it, then.

My love was honest. It was true.

But it wasn’t enough.

“Here.” I grabbed the glass of water and helped him raise it to his lips. “Drink.”

He sipped at the water, only taking in meager mouthfuls at a time in between more coughing. When his lungs finally cleared, he finished the rest of the water like he’d just been dying of thirst.

Or like he’d just been dying.

“Funny how the tables have turned now,” he rasped as he passed the glass back into my hands. “Guess you can take my breath away too.”

“I’m going to go get more water,” I said, rising. “And some soup. There are still leftovers in the fridge from last night. We need to keep your strength up until...”

My eyes met Mal’s. He held my gaze for a moment, then gave me a nod.

Until what? It was a question that neither of us had an answer to right now.

But there had to be one. There had to be *something*.

We just had to try harder. Dig deeper.

Until we'd hit rock bottom, I wasn't giving up.

"I'll be right back," I promised him.

It wasn't just water that I was leaving the room for, though.

Whether Mal thought it would help or not...

It was finally time to give in and call Mom.

But halfway to the door, a sound echoed through the house from down the hall.

The doorbell was ringing.

Maybe Mom had finally found a way around my banishing charms? Living this far from town, I didn't get many visitors. Only my mother, really.

Maybe she'd come to visit me first.

"Just a sec," I said to Mal. "I'm gonna go see who it is real quick."

He nodded, then nestled deeper into the pillow as I headed to the front door.

When I opened it, I didn't find my mother on the other side, though.

I didn't find *anything* I'd been expecting, for that matter.

"Oh...oh my god," I sputtered, taking a step back. I had to, just so I could get a full view of all the faces gathered outside my front door. Bea and Don, who held a brown-haired, gray-eyed toddler in their arms—Abbie. Big, burly Lock and a very pregnant Joan. A handsome man with blue eyes and a white streak through his black hair. In his arms, he held a chubby-cheeked little girl who shared his coloring. At his side was a beautiful blonde woman. I nearly gasped again when I saw her face.

She looked exactly like the woman I'd found in that folded-over picture on the night of my wedding nearly a month ago. The friend that I'd forgotten—the one I'd been forced to forget.

Evie.

"Oh my *god*," I said again, louder this time.

The dark-haired man—Luke, if I had to guess—snorted.

"Not sure what the Almighty has to do with this," he said in a deep, rough English accent. "But last I checked, I'm still the Devil. Will that do?"

"We're here to help," Bea said. "All of us. Can we come in?"

“Of course we can.” Joan gave me a quick smile and a kiss on the cheek as she pushed past me. “Sorry for the intrusion, Aves—but this baby is playing kickball with my bladder right now. You can throw us out later if you need—but let me use your bathroom first. I’m about to burst.”

“You remember where it is?” I called after Joan, who had already shuffled down the hall.

She only slammed the door of the bathroom behind her in reply.

Apparently, she did.

“Well...” I moved further away from the door to give them all room as a faint, uncertain smile pulled at my lips. These people were our allies. Our friends. Our family. I didn’t know how much help they’d be...but I was still glad they were here. It was a little reassuring, at least, to know that Mal and I weren’t in this alone. Not anymore. “Like Joan said. Come on in.”

I took the men to the bedroom where Mal was resting. Hopefully, he'd be happy to see them.

More likely, I knew, he'd be pissed that I was letting them see him like *this*—but he would just have to cowboy up and deal with it.

Don was Mal's brother. Lock and Luke were his friends. And whether we liked it or not, they were our best hope for figuring out a way to break the spell that was currently sucking his life away.

He owed them his time. If we didn't find a solution soon, it might be the last time he had with them at all.

"I'll wrangle the girls while you all figure out dinner," Bea offered, laughing as Lily and Abbie dragged her into the living room. "Not that it seems like I have a choice."

"Play nice, Lily!" Evie called after them. "No bossing!"

"I *won't*!" Lily shouted back—but in a certain tone that suggested she was planning on doing exactly that.

"She's going through a phase," Evie explained with a tired laugh. "Always wants to have everything *exactly* her way."

"My nieces were like that for a little bit, too." Tentatively, I smiled at her. That felt...right. Easy, even, once I arranged my face in the right way. "They're triplets—imagine, like, three redheaded Lilies all trying to command each other."

Evie snorted. “You know, I’d rather not try to imagine that, if it’s okay with you. Three Lilies... One is enough of a handful as is.”

“She’ll probably grow out of it, at least?” I offered. “My nieces did.”

“Then I’m relieved for Zara,” Evie said. I blinked as I processed that for a second—how did she know my sister’s name? But then, it clicked. Of course she knew. She probably knew all of my sisters’ names—and more. Once upon a time, we’d been best friends. “Fortunately for her, her girls aren’t the devil’s daughters.” Evie sighed wistfully as she looked into the living room, where Bea, Abbie and Evie looked primed for a pillow fight. “Ordering people around and having problems with authority are kind of in her blood.”

“Then Heaven help me when I finally give birth to Lock’s little monster.” Joan patted her belly then moved to lean against the counter. “What’s for eats, Aves? I’m starvin’.”

“Hmm. There’s leftover soup from yesterday.” I opened the fridge and scanned the contents. Luckily, food was something I always kept plenty of here. At least we weren’t going to starve. “I’ve got a bunch of bone broth in here, plus lots of veggies from the garden. We could cook up a new batch pretty quick, then toss in the leftovers to make sure there’s enough?”

“Sounds good,” Evie said. “Feel free to order me around then, Chef. You always were the best cook out of the four of us.”

“I don’t suppose you’ve got any bacon handy?” Joan asked hopefully as I moved to the pantry for potatoes. “I’ve got the worst craving right now—I could eat a whole pig of the stuff.”

“In the fridge. You start with the bacon,” I told Evie. “I’ll start washing potatoes and Joan can—”

“Set the table,” Joan supplied with a wink. “We both know I’ll do less damage if I don’t touch the food at all.”

As Joan slipped out of the room, silverware in hand, I was left alone with Evie for a moment. I found myself staring at her—she occupied such a strange place in my mind that it was kind of hard *not* to stare.

A best friend. The missing piece of our puzzle that I hadn’t even realized was gone until now.

She must have felt my gaze on her, because she paused and turned as she opened the fridge door.

“This must be weird for you,” she said softly. “I remember everything about you, and you don’t know anything about me at all.”

"I'm a little jealous of Joan and Bea for getting to remember," I admitted. "They said that Lock and Don were able to give them their memories back little by little, but with Mal being human now..." I shrugged like it didn't hurt, but of course, it did. "I guess he isn't able to anymore."

"I didn't want them to keep everything from you for so long," Evie said. "I've...well, obviously I've missed you. But it's more than that. When you sacrificed your memories of all of this to keep Lily safe...it was a lot to lose, Aves. It's not fair that you're still in the dark. Not after everything you did for me and Luke and Lily."

"Mal said it was safest for me not to remember. I believe him." *Mal*. He was the reason that everyone was here tonight. I'd already mourned the loss of all my memories of our first love. I hated that I could already feel myself preparing for the loss of our second chance, too. "I mean, look what even being near me has done to him. Even if I could remember everything from before...maybe it would only make this hurt more."

"If we can find a way to save Mal, we can start working on getting your memories back next." Evie bumped her hip against mine as she passed me with a package of bacon. It felt familiar, but with nothing to ground it on. Like walking into an apartment where I'd once lived—somewhere that I'd forgotten the layout of, even though I still remembered its scent.

"I mean...I hate to be the buzzkill, but..." My shoulders slumped as I ran the spatula under the hot water. "That's a big *if* at this point."

"No, it's not. We'll figure this out." Joan came back into the kitchen and yanked a stack of plates from the cabinet. "We have to. No point in accepting defeat when we've still got time."

Time. Was that something we had at this point? I wasn't so sure about that—but Joan sounded so certain.

I wanted so badly to believe that she was right.

"And when we do figure this out, we girls should go back to Vegas." Evie laid the strips of bacon on the cold cast iron, then turned on the burner. "See if we can't trigger some of your memories there. We could leave the kids with the men and book a suite at the Bellagio, maybe get tickets for some shows and—"

Evie was cut off by a sudden knocking on the door—three quick, sharp raps.

I knew that knock. I knew exactly who was responsible for it, too.

The question was...how the hell had she gotten onto my property at all?

“Sorry.” I gave Evie an apologetic smile as I dried off my hands. “Let me go see who that is.”

“More reinforcements, maybe,” she teased, returning my smile. “Maybe the Olympians and the Aesir have shown up to help us out, too.”

I laughed at her joke—I was pretty sure it was a joke, anyway—as I headed down the hall, but the sound was a hollow one.

As I opened the door, I knew I wasn’t about to find reinforcements of any kind.

No—our mystery knocker was just my dear, sweet mom.

“Hello, Ava.” She smiled at me curtly as she pulled back her black hood. “Can we talk?”

“How did you get past my wards?” I hissed, stepping outside. I closed the front door behind me and kept my voice low. The last thing I needed right now was for her to realize exactly how many angels, demons and otherwise I had inside my cottage right now—or for those same angels and demons to realize that the architect of Mal’s condition was outside, for that matter.

“Ava,” Mom cooed with disappointment. “I showed you how to make those wards. Did you really think I wouldn’t be able to unmake them? They were good, of course—your work always has been—but all that meant was I needed a little more time.”

“What are you doing here?” I asked stiffly. *Liar*—a word that always crossed my mind when my mother came up these days. It was certainly on my brain right now. “You’re not wanted. Take a hint.”

“I just thought I would stop by and see how things were going. I’ve missed you ever since the wedding, you know. A girl can only avoid her mother for so long.” She reached into her purse and pulled out an egg. “Do you mind?”

“Do I mind wha—hey! Stop!” I recoiled as Mom ran the egg over my stomach in broad circles. “What the hell are you doing?”

“Checking to see if you’re pregnant yet.” Mom cracked the egg into the palm of her hand and scowled at the results. It looked like...a cracked egg. Runny white and single, golden yolk. “No blood—so, no.” She arched a brow. “I’m assuming your husband isn’t dead yet, then.”

“No, he’s not.” I pulled back my lips in a sneer of annoyance as she discarded both eggshell and egg onto the lawn. “No thanks to you.”

“He’s fading, isn’t he?” Mom guessed.

“He is. More quickly now than ever.” There was no point in lying about it. She obviously knew what was going on here—and it would at least be nice to confirm what I already suspected. “It *is* your fault, isn’t it?”

“He’s bound by powerful magic, Ava. Mal and I made an agreement. He’s not holding up his end—so he’s paying the price.” She shrugged—like his life meant so little. “You can’t hold me responsible for the fact that your husband can’t honor an honest deal.”

“Honest. Right.” I wanted to scream at her. I wanted to scream, period. But that would only alert everyone inside—which was the last thing I needed right now. “So. You forced him into making an agreement with you, and now he dies if he consummates our marriage, and he dies if he doesn’t. Does that feel *honest* to you?”

“I didn’t think I’d need to remind you what’s at stake here, Ava. If this child isn’t conceived—”

“The world ends—or so you say. I know. I’m aware.” I clutched my arms around my ribs tight and fought back the hot snake of rage writhing its way through my insides. “But if he dies, and we can’t bring him back, my world ends anyway.”

“Your world.” Mom scoffed, staring at me like I’d lost my mind. “He’s not your world, Ava. He’s a demon. A creature of evil straight from Hell itself.”

“He’s a *man*,” I snapped. I was done with that lie. I was done with *all* of her lies. “You took his wings. You made him human. He told me so himself—and I’ve seen the scars.”

“Ava...” Mom pulled her lips into a thin line, then nodded. “Yes. You’re right. I did do that—but I did it for good reason. Please try to understand that. If he’d stayed a demon, I never could have bound him here so completely.”

“And if you’d never bound him here, we wouldn’t be in this mess at all. You’re not the only one with a prophecy, Mom.” I pointed to the door behind us. “Inside right now, Mal and his big, bad, *evil* friends are trying to find a way to save the world, too. Only, the prophecy that they’re

working off of says that if this baby is born, it won't save the world. It won't save *anything*."

Mom's expression shifted slightly. Concern was creeping in. "I don't know what you mean. The only prophecy I'm aware of is my own."

"Heaven and Hell have a prophecy too," I explained. "One that says when your supposed savior child comes of age, four ancient Riders will come to claim it and the apocalypse will begin."

"That's..." Mom furrowed her brow. "No. That can't be true. It's just more lies from Hell, Ava. Why can't you see that?"

"I'm seeing a lot more here than what you're willing to show me." I shook my head as I felt my heart crushing in on itself all over again. "You're the one who's refusing to see the bigger picture here. The Riders are being controlled by a fallen angel. If he gets his way—"

"Which fallen angel?" Mom grabbed my hands. There was urgency in her voice now—and in her eyes as well. "Lucifer? Moloch?"

"No—they're on our side." In fact, they were quite literally inside my house even as we spoke. "What does it matter, though? I'm trying to tell you—"

"Beelzebub? Mammon?" My mother squeezed my hands tight enough to make my knuckles crack beneath her grip. Her eyes narrowed with suspicion. "Not Belial, surely? I didn't think she had it in her, but—"

"Belial is Mal's mother," I told her, wrenching my hands out of her grasp. "If she had them, I'd be a lot less worried."

Maybe not by *much*—Mal didn't speak any more highly of his mother than I'd been speaking of my own as of late—but it was better than the reality we were actually facing.

"Ava." Mom took my face in her hands and pressed her thumbs hard against my cheekbones. "It's very important that you tell me *exactly* which of the Fallen has these souls."

"Why?" I asked—a reasonable question if I'd ever come up with one. "Why does it matter?"

I could tell at a glance that my mother had no intention of answering me. Her face was set in a silent worry—one that I knew good and well wouldn't break until she got what she wanted first.

"His name is Leviathan," I said with an exasperated sigh. "Mal says he's bad news."

“Leviathan...” My mother’s face fell. She finally let go of my hands. “Yes. All right. I can see why you’re worried then.”

“And I can see that you’re equally worried too, now.” It was written all over her. She might as well have spelled it out in lipstick. “Do you know of Leviathan too? Does this mean you’ll break the spell?”

“Oh, I know Leviathan,” my mother assured me with a shudder—a rare thing for her. It was a bad sign—this was even worse than I’d originally thought. “But as I told you, Ava... I can’t stop this. What’s been set in motion will stay as such—as it should. My prophecy isn’t wrong—and it was never a lie.”

“But if you want to stop Leviathan, and the other prophecy says—”

“It doesn’t matter what the other prophecy says. If it’s true, then somehow...both are true.” Mom shook her head quickly. I could tell she was already trying to square this circle in her mind. “But if you’re in Leviathan’s sights, you’re going to need all the protection you can get right now. Especially Mal’s.”

“Bit difficult for him since you made him human,” I pointed out bitterly. “And it’ll be even harder for him to protect me if he’s dead.”

“Yes,” she muttered. “I suppose that’s true. But a husband’s love can be a powerful thing—and you’ll need all the help you can get in the days to come.” She held her hands out, palms up, and shrugged. “I can’t break our family’s curse, Ava. I wish I could. I wish this hadn’t hurt you so much. I can’t save your husband’s life or stop any of the things that have already been set in motion. What I *can* try is to bring him back after he’s gone.”

“Necromancy.” It was a word that left a bad taste in my mouth—like dirt and rot. “That’s your solution to all of this? Let him die and cross your fingers that you can breathe life back into him once he’s gone?”

“Necromancy,” Mom confirmed. “If we want to save Mal—and believe me, Ava, now I see how necessary that is—it’s our only hope.”

“Then I need you to do more than try,” I told her. “I *do* love him, Mom. I loved him before I lost my memories, and I love him now. I don’t want him dead. Especially not because of me.”

“I can see that now. It’s in your eyes, isn’t it?” Mom smoothed my hair down with a sigh, then backed away. “Which is why I need you to be prepared to lose him. It will make this easier. All I can do here is my best—and I will. But if that fails...”

“Don’t say it.” I bit my lip as tears began to well up in my eyes.
“Just...go.”

After I slipped back inside and closed the door, I braced myself against it. My chest was tense. My lungs were on fire. I panted, struggling to catch my breath.

I knew exactly what happened next. If Mom could bring Mal back after, then my world would go on existing.

If she couldn’t, he’d be gone forever—and my world would fall apart.

But first, we needed to fulfill the destiny we’d been doomed to.

I needed to sleep with Mal—and I needed to do it tonight.

If I didn’t...none of this would matter.

He’d be dead by morning either way.

MAL

A wise man once said to keep your friends close and your enemies closer.

Seeing as my own friends were currently standing around in my bedroom gawking at me, I guessed next I was supposed to cuddle up to the forces of both Heaven and Hell right there in my bed.

“Yer all looking well,” I grumbled as I forced myself into a sitting position. My bones ached in their very marrow. My muscles were full of push pins and lead.

“Aye—and yer lookin’ like shite, lad.” Lock swaggered across the room to sit on the edge of my bed. “Not takin’ to marriage as well as ye thought ye would, hmm?”

“Reckon the marriage is the easy part, actually.” I jerked my head to the side as Lock reached over to ruffle my hair. “It’s the dyin’ that’s givin’ me grief.”

“Ava’s mother’s little binding spell really is killing you, isn’t it?” Luke wandered the room, gravitating toward Ava’s candles and crystals.

“Unless I give her what she wants and consummate this marriage,” I said. “She wants Ava pregnant. Says she reckons the baby will save the world.”

“Ah, in-laws.” Don rubbed the back of his neck and shot me a sympathetic look. “And I thought Bea’s parents were bad.”

“If you have this baby, *our* prophecy is fulfilled too. Four kings of Hell, four fated mates...four children who will bring about the apocalypse. Yours and Ava’s is the last piece of the puzzle.” Luke glanced over his shoulder at me as he stood before Ava’s bookshelves. “I might be stating the obvious here, but there *are* ways to consummate a marriage without instigating pregnancy, aren’t there?” He lifted a pink crystal from a shelf and studied it as he held it up to the light. “Birth control, condoms... pulling out?”

“All three at once,” Lock suggested. “No’ as much fun that way, I ken, but it’s better than the alternative.”

“Even so—Ava’s bloodline’s cursed,” I reminded them. “If I bed her, I’m done for anyway. Any man she sleeps with dies for the pleasure.”

“We’ve tried thwarting the prophecy in the past,” Don said. “It’s not just words that we can circumvent. It’s practically destiny. If Mal dies without fulfilling it...”

“Might be other kings of Hell that come forward,” said Luke. “Worse ones.”

“Yeah. You’ve got a good point there. Better my child than Beelzebub’s or...” I grimaced. “Mammon’s.”

The thought of that hunchbacked old coot laying so much as a hand on Ava made me want to strangle the life straight out of his thick, sagging throat.

“Or Leviathan’s,” Lock grumbled. “Last thing we want is for him to decide it’s time to claim Hell for himself so he can take this into his own hands.”

“Don’t like the thought of that one bit.” I clenched my fists and gritted my teeth as a rogue ribbon of anger unfurled within me.

No. It wouldn’t be Zeb who saw this prophecy through. Not Mammon. And as for Leviathan—I’d claw my way back out of my own grave before I let him claim Ava for himself.

She was mine. Mine by marriage. Mine by divine right.

Mine by fate.

“That settles it then, don’t it?” I gave a small shrug and felt the weight of the entire world on my shoulders, weighing them down. “The prophecy has gotta be fulfilled—and it has to be me who does it. I don’t want anyone else near her. ‘Specially not the likes of them who might try to take my place.”

“I don’t like it but... Yes. Looks like.” Luke placed the crystal back down. “I’m sorry, Mal. You’ve sacrificed so much trying to prevent this. I know it isn’t...” *Fair*, was the word I suspected had been moments away from passing through Luke’s lips—but he discarded it before it spilled out. Of course it wasn’t fair. Nothing about this world was. “It isn’t what we’d choose if we had a choice.”

“Oh, we’ve got choices.” I tried to laugh—there was nothing left to do *but* laugh about what a mess I’d gotten us all into—but only a dry cough came from my throat in its place. “They’re just all dogshit. It’s gotta be me, and it might as well be tonight.”

“Tonight? But...are you sure about this, Mal?” Don asked. His face was twisted with concern. Damn near warmed my heart—good old-fashioned brotherly love. “If we just had a little more time...”

“But we don’t, do we?” I said. “Naw. I’ve already bought us all the time we can afford right now. I’m gettin’ weaker by the minute. Pretty soon, I doubt I’ll be able to even get out of bed at this point. And the angels are already aware that Ava and I are married. Only a matter of time before Leviathan and his lot find out as well.”

“And once they do, the forces of both Heaven and Hell will be bearing down on Greenriver,” said Luke.

“Exactly. They’ll be comin’ here, either to kill Ava or try to force this pregnancy. And I’ll be here, completely unable to protect her.” I clenched my fists in frustration—but even my grip felt pathetic. Flimsy and weak. “All this time, we’ve been tryin’ to do whatever’s safest for her. And right now, the way things look, that means sowin’ my seed and accepting my fate.”

As the words left my mouth, relief washed over me like a warm breeze on a cold night. It was a conclusion I’d come to a dozen times now in my head—but admitting it out loud made it feel more certain. More real.

I’d been walking down this path for all my life. Every time I’d met Ava along it, I’d only come to love her more.

But now that I could see the end of it, I knew that there’d only ever been one destination in store for me.

I adored Ava. I’d lived thousands of years yearning for her in between her short, human lives.

Now, I’d die for her.

Whatever happened after was out of my hands.

“I need somethin’ from y’all,” I said, looking from face to face as I worked up the guts to ask. Don, Lock, and Luke. They’d been my closest comrades from birth. When we’d first fought alongside each other, the humans in the fray had only carried sticks and stones.

Now, they’d have to fight on without me.

They’d have to fight, and they’d have to win.

“Anything, lad.” Lock gave me a nod. “Ye only need ask, and it’s done.”

“When I’m gone...” I glanced to the doorway. Outside it, just down the hall, Ava was probably in the kitchen whipping up dinner. I could already smell bacon frying and onions sizzling away on the stove. The scents of my last meal—and if Ava was making it, then I couldn’t imagine a better one. “I need y’all to protect her. Keep her safe.” I closed my eyes and let myself imagine our child. Tiny hands. Chubby feet. Ava’s red hair, bright as fire burning through the dark of night. “Keep ‘em both safe.”

“Course we will,” said Lock. “Wouldnae dream of doin’ anything but.”

“We’d never let either of them come to harm,” Don added. “They’re family. We’ll make sure they have everything they need.”

“It’s more than that, though. We know that when this baby is born, after it comes of age...shit will kick off here on Earth.” I forced my eyes open again. They ached as much as the rest of me—but I needed them to see the seriousness in my gaze. “That means you’ve got plenty of time to find some way to save this place. Ava loves this place—and I love her.”

“Then we’ll do it,” said Luke. He gave me a nod. So did Lock. So did Don. “We’ll do it for you both.”

AVA

Dinner was a warm, quiet affair. Luke and Don hauled Mal to the table with his arms slung over their shoulders. The entire way there, Mal grumbled and cussed and spat with all the annoyance of soaking wet tomcat that he didn't need help. But as he sat at my side at the table, he traced his fingertips idly up and down my thigh. He hummed with approval as I fed him spoonfuls of soup and, when Lock raised his glass for a toast to Mal's health, Mal worked up the energy to raise his glass in return.

As Lily and Abbie proposed a food fight—then argued with their mothers on the merits of flinging spoonfuls of potatoes at each other—I even saw him crack a smile.

We didn't get a chance to be alone until after everyone else had gone to bed. With Joan's pregnancy in mind, the others insisted that she and Lock take the guest room. Don and Bea slipped through the Abyss to return to Hell for *infernal business*—whatever that entailed—leaving Luke and Evie to watch after Abbie as she and Lily turned the living room into a massive pillow fort for them all.

Then, finally, it was just me and Mal.

I helped him get back to bed. My legs were just as jittery as his were tired. My entire body was still tense with worry. I knew exactly what a terrifying thing I was about to ask him for.

I didn't think Mal would be afraid of this new plan. Reluctant, maybe. But whether he was too brave or just too stubborn, fear had never seemed to make its way into his vocabulary.

I was the one who was scared of this. Scared of losing him. Scared that we wouldn't be able to bring him back.

Scared about what might happen if I got pregnant and my mother was wrong.

All this, for a child she'd decided would save the world.

If we'd had the option, I knew Mal and I would have found a way to make things work between us without fucking. We'd done it before. We could've done it again. It wasn't like I'd gone wanting all these weeks—at least, not for long.

"What's on yer mind, darlin'?" Mal reached out to me as I stood over him at the bedside.

I took his hand in mine and squeezed it tight, until the sharp edges of his calluses were cutting into the soft skin of my palm.

"I spoke to my mother," I admitted. "Earlier, while you were talking with the guys. She...she says this isn't going to get any better, and there's nothing she can do to stop it. It's only going to get worse."

I stared down at him, expecting a heavy sigh or a scowl. Instead, Mal only held my gaze, his blue eyes surprisingly serene.

"Figured as much." He moved my hand to his cheek and pressed my palm against his prickly stubble. His skin warmed almost immediately at my touch. "Best get on with it, then."

"What?" I blinked, surprised. I hadn't expected Mal to put up much of a fight—not with everything bearing down on us like this. But I'd expected him to at least...I didn't know. Suggest an alternative? Ask me for just a little more time?

No. As I searched Mal's eyes, I didn't find any hesitation.

We were on the same page here. The same ugly, horrible page of the same terrible, tragic book.

"If it ain't gonna get better, then I ain't waitin' any longer." He wound his other hand around my waist and dragged me into bed with him. He was stronger now than he'd been all night. It was like his body knew that soon, it wouldn't have to keep fighting. Soon, all of this would be over—

And I'd be left all alone.

I wiggled my way beneath the sheets and snuggled against him. I couldn't possibly hold him tight enough right now—but dammit, I was going to try.

“I don't want to lose you,” I whispered as I buried my face in his chest. I nuzzled him roughly, pressing as close as I could. “I don't want you to die.”

“Then maybe you oughta stop squeezin' me to death,” Mal rasped. His chest rumbled with a thin chuckle. “You cuddle me any harder, you're gonna kill me before I even get a chance to breed ya.”

“Dammit, Mal...” Despite the lump in my throat, I found myself laughing with him. Obliging, I loosened my hold on his chest—just a little. “Take this seriously, will you?”

“I'm takin' it seriously,” he assured me. “But if there ain't no other way ahead—if yer gonna lose me no matter what—I don't want ya to remember me all snivelin' and tears and heartache.” He eased his shoulders back and pulled my body on top of his. “I want ya to remember me laughin' and talkin' shit and lovin' ya, darlin'. That's how it oughta be. We do this tonight and you remember the best of me. Won't settle for anything less.”

I positioned my elbows on either side of his face and propped my chin up in my hands so I could look down at him. His eyes were a little glossy. My waterworks were about to kick in any minute now.

But he was right. No tears. Not right now.

If we were going to do this, we owed it to ourselves to make this everything it always should have been.

“Maybe I don't have to just remember you,” I said. “I asked Mom if she could find a way to bring you back...after. She says she's going to try.”

Mal arched a brow. “And you trust her?”

“I didn't at first. But I do now. I think so, at least. And even if I don't...it's our only hope, isn't it?”

Mal closed his eyes and nodded. Beneath the sheets, he ran his hands down my back. I shivered at how good it felt to be touched by him.

Everything with Mal always felt good. Even the bad parts of our relationship—at the end of the day, even the times we'd fought had ended up good by the time we were done.

“All right, darlin'. You let her do what she can.” Mal found the hem of my sundress and tugged it upward. I helped him pull it off of me. When he

threw it aside, I pressed my tits against his chest and ran my fingers through his hair. Mal leaned into my touch, humming gently. “Just make sure whatever she does, she does it before the worms start eatin’ me. I don’t wanna come back to life just to find that my cock’s gone and fallen off.”

“I’m not going to let your cock fall off.” I laughed again as I spread my thighs to straddle his hips, but the sound was bittersweet. His cock was already half-hard beneath me. As I settled my pussy against it, it swelled to full firmness almost instantly. “I’m going to take very good care of it—and I’m going to take very good care of you, too.”

Mal’s boxers. My panties. Those were the only things left between us now. Our underwear, a few stupid jokes, and the overwhelming reality that this would be both our first time—and very possibly, our last as well.

Mal curled his fingers around my hips and let out a tense breath as I lowered my lips down toward his.

“I’ve been waitin’ a long time for this moment, darlin’,” he said. “I don’t give a damn about you takin’ care of me. All I wanna do right now is take care of you.”

He moved his hands to my waist and pulled me up his chest. His strength was definitely returning. If anything, he was stronger than ever now.

“What are you doing?” I asked through a nervous laugh. If we were going to make love... “I can’t exactly ride your cock from this angle, hon.”

“No—but a little higher up and you can ride my face instead.”

My eyes went wide with interest. My pussy throbbed, growing wetter by the second.

“Oh.”

“I was a King of Hell once, darlin’. In a better world, I would have crowned you my queen and sat you on a throne by my side.” Mal released my waist for a moment to grab my hair and tug me down for a quick kiss. “Least I can do is give you a different throne to sit on.”

His queen. I may not have worn the crown, but as I shifted up to straddle Mal’s lips, I felt more regal than I ever had before.

I was Mal’s wife. His soulmate. If he came inside me...chances were I’d become the mother of his child as well.

I knew I could be his queen too. I wanted to play that role as much as any other in Mal's life.

Even if it was only for tonight.

I wrapped one set of fingers around the edge of the headboard and wove the other into Mal's hair. My body was already shaking with anticipation for what I knew would come next. With fear, for what would happen when we were done.

"You're all right, darlin'." Mal wrapped his arms around my thighs and tugged me downward. "C'mere. If you're gonna tremble, you're gonna do it for *me*."

The lips of my pussy landed right against the lips of his mouth. He slipped his tongue into my slit, kissing my cunt with a tender, hungry passion. The heat throbbing through me dripped wet and sticky as he released it from my folds, and Mal lapped at it like it was ambrosia.

He moaned with pleasure. His fingers pressed into my thighs, pulling me down more firmly onto his mouth.

He'd promised me a throne—but it was hard to imagine that even the royal seats of Hell could make sin feel *this* good.

My hips began to roll of their own accord as Mal's tongue delved deeper. He pushed it into me, narrow and long at first. Then, he widened it out once he was inside my channel, like he was trying to stretch me out in preparation for his cock.

"My clit," I gasped as I felt myself clenching around him. "Please, Mal—suck my clit."

Mal was quick and eager to oblige. He slipped his tongue out of me once more and licked my pussy from bottom to top. With the tip of his tongue, he flicked against my swollen bud until my gasps turned to whimpers.

I was shaking harder than ever now. But just like he'd wanted—now, my body was trembling for him.

A ragged cry left my throat when he finally clasped his lips around my clit. I twisted his hair tighter in my fingers, holding on for dear life. Tendrils of pure ecstasy twisted up into my core. My hips bucked greedily in response.

"Oh my god," I breathed, clenching my eyes shut tight. This was far from the first time that Mal had edged me toward the cliffs of orgasm with his mouth like this, but normally, I was on my back and he was in control.

Normally, this was the main event—but as I began to feel my pleasure soar to the familiar heights of joy against Mal’s mouth, I knew that this time, it was only an appetizer.

When we finally reached the main event, I didn’t know that either of us would be able to control ourselves at all anymore.

I gritted my teeth and pulled my lips back, bucking my hips like I was riding a stallion. I clung to Mal’s mane in desperation, and Mal growled beneath me, clinging right back.

He sucked my clit between his teeth and pinned it down. Brightness and delight flooded through me as he swept his tongue against it, teasing every sensitive nerve ending with a devouring need.

Heat was quickly swelling in my core as Mal lashed against my clit with his tongue, like a balloon that was stretching toward its breaking point.

And when it popped—

“Fuck! Mal!” I gasped and gasped without letting out my breath. My lungs were on fire. My entire body was aflame. I pulled his hair until I felt his lips wincing against my cunt. I trembled like sand caught in an earthquake and thrashed like a screen door in a hurricane.

It came, and it went, and it came again. Mal gripped my thighs and pulled me from his lips before I could even catch my breath. He moved fast, kissing up my body while the orgasm was still crashing within me.

He moved me like I was a precious, fragile doll, and at the same time, he moved me like a piece of meat he couldn’t wait to get between his teeth.

“Shh. I gotcha.” Mal kissed my shaking shoulder, then bit gently into its flesh. He moved his lips to my mouth as his hands smoothed down my body, positioning me exactly how he liked.

My thighs, spread wide and straddling his hips. His cock, stiff against my cunt, angled upward like curved steel.

He wrapped his arms around my head and pulled me downward. He crushed my lips against his. My sweetness was slick on his mouth, his chin, his tongue.

“Brace yourself, darlin’,” he instructed me as he broke the kiss. His hands caressed down my back and took my hips once more. “Rise up and come back down on me. I’ll guide myself in.”

I pulled back so I could look into his eyes as my hips moved as he commanded. I lifted them, and Mal took his cock into his fist. His tip kissed my folds, then settled between them at my entrance.

This was it. The moment. *Our* moment.

“I love you,” I told him. The need was screaming within me, but so was regret. This should have happened some other way—any other way. But no—that had never been our fate. I knew if we didn’t do this now, I’d never work up the courage to do it again. “I love you so much.”

“I love you, too, darlin’.

 More than all our lives combined.” He arched up to steal another kiss and nipped at my bottom lip. “Now, take my fuckin’ cock.”

Despite myself, I laughed. There were tears in my eyes—both happy and sad.

I loved him enough to laugh with him, even now.

I loved him enough to lose him, so that someday—I hoped, I prayed—I could bring him back and have him to love all over again.

Slowly, I lowered my pussy down onto Mal’s tip. His thickness stretched me out, found resistance...

Then, like we were made for each other, something slipped between us and he was inside.

I was expecting pain, but all I found was adrenaline and light as our bodies finally became one.

“FUCK, YOU’RE TIGHT,” Mal growled against my neck. “You’ve got a cunt well worth dyin’ for, darlin’.”

“Mal...” My chest rose and fell in labored breaths as pleasure mingled with momentary ache, then shifted to pleasure all over again. I pulled back to stare down at him. I needed to see his face. Needed to remember every feature, every line. Beneath my ribcage, my heart was already breaking. There was no pleasure in that. It only hurt. “Don’t say that.”

“Why not? I mean it.” As Mal stared up at me, the seriousness in his blues told me it was the truth. He wrapped his arms around me and pulled me back down to him. “I’ve burned for you, Ava. I’ve wanted ya. For far too long, I’ve needed this. Now that I’ve got it...” He nipped at my neck, then soothed the bite with a hungry kiss. “Can’t think of a better way to go.”

His hips shifted up slowly, pressing his cock deeper. The way he stretched me to fit it was maddening. There was the sharp, sudden sear of hurt as my channel was brought to its limit—then, immediately after, there was the throb of pure need to be hurt again. To claim more of him, and be claimed in return. To take more—more—*more*.

Mal eased me into it, breathing in through his nose and out through his teeth. His body strained against the mattress like a beast barely able to stop itself from thrashing against its binding chains. His every movement was slow and focused—but the more of his cock he gave me, the easier it became to accept it.

My cunt was slippery with need. My own body was tense with that same ravenous, pent-up energy—and where Mal was able to control himself, I'd never been quite that adept at it.

Mal had been waiting for this moment for a long time. That was true.

But I'd been waiting to give myself to a man like him for my entire life. Or maybe, I'd just been waiting for *him*. For Mal, and Mal alone. And after a lifetime of denial...my own hunger could only take so much before I couldn't refuse it any longer.

I moved my hips in time with his. The hurt was gone now. The only pain I felt was the one in my chest—a growing wound on my heart I wasn't sure would ever heal. The sensation in my core was still sharp, still stabbing. But hurt—no. It didn't hurt at all anymore.

Every jolt of heat he sent through me now only felt better with every thrust.

Gradually, I picked up the pace. My clit was swollen for him, desperate to be touched. I moved my fingers between my thighs and rolled the bud beneath them, matching the rhythm of our bodies.

It was a rhythm that I wanted to lose control of. Faster. Harder. Yes. I wanted both of us to lose control, until the pleasure was so intense I couldn't even feel the heartache anymore.

"Slow down, darlin'." Mal grabbed my hips and slammed them down, sheathing the full length of his cock inside me. I gasped and went stiff as I felt him bottom out within me. He held me there for a long moment until my muscles relaxed once more.

"I need it," I whimpered. "I need *you*. More. Please. Please, more."

"I need you too, Ava. But if you go too fast..." He let out a rough laugh. "I ain't gonna be able to hold out for long. You feel too damn good."

The way your cunt is milkin' me...fuck." He shook his head. "No. You let me set this pace. I want this too damn much to waste it. Gonna make it last."

I bit my lip, then reluctantly nodded.

I wanted Mal to ravish me—but I wanted this to last, too.

He pulled me back up, sliding all but the tip of his cock out of me before he plunged me down onto him again. With his cock and his hands, he used my body like a sex toy—and with his mouth and his growls of pleasure, he worshiped me like I was a god.

His teeth scraped against the curves of my breasts, biting down hard enough to make me cry out—only to be replaced by his tongue, soft and slick and warm, soothing the bruises he left on my skin. His hands guided my body firmly, setting exactly the pace he wanted.

I trembled for him. I mewled and strained and moaned.

This moment was everything to me—and the more everything it became, the less it felt like we were two separate people. Instead, we were one thing. One soul. Demon. Human. Peasant and royalty. We were divine, all-powerful, and we were hopeless. Helpless.

We were lost to the cruel hands of fate, and we were the masters of our own destinies all at once.

Even with Mal's insistence on going slow, even his restraint couldn't hold out forever. His fingers pressed deep into my skin as he gave himself up to what we both were longing for. My nails bit into his neck in return as I followed.

Now that we were one, there was no such thing as holding back anymore. Mal wrapped his arms around me, holding me crushingly tight to his chest as his hips bucked up savagely. I pounded my fist against his shoulder while my abs tensed and my cunt throbbed.

My pussy squeezed him with every thrust in, and released him with every withdraw. It matched my heartbeat. It matched his. We traded breaths as we conquered each other's lips, half-sick with desire to consume each other and half-insane with the spiraling need to savor every second like it was the last.

"That's it," Mal grunted as I bit his cheek. He tugged my hair and sank his cock especially deep inside me—payback. "Give it to me, Ava. I want to feel you. Wanna be hurt by you. Give me everything. I want it all."

I came for him in an explosion of pure, raw energy. I came again, and again, each time new and delicious and full of sin. Like a wave rising up over a helpless ship lost at sea, only to crash down over it and bury it beneath the churning waters. Like a Roman candle set aflame, firing brilliant orbs of crackling fire into the night. I came for him like a star bursting under the pressure of infinity. I came like a universe collapsing in on itself, only to swell back up and begin anew.

Over and over, I came for Mal—and as his breathing grew more and more ragged, I knew he was getting close too.

“Mal—no, wait.” I pressed my nails into his cheeks, forcing him to look at me as I rested my sweat-slick forehead against his. “Don’t—maybe if you don’t, we can—”

“No,” he growled back at me. In response to my plea, he only fucked me harder. “I want this. I need this. You’re my wife, Ava—and I’ll be damned if I don’t leave yer cunt full of my seed. Waited too long—want ya too bad. You’re my wife—and you’re gonna be bred. Like it or not.”

I let out a sob as I felt his balls tense beneath me. I clung to him like he was the only real thing left in this entire world.

As far as I was concerned, in that moment, he was.

I did want it. That was the best part—the worst. The thought of his cum rushing up into my womb only sent me over the edge again. I snarled as I tried to fight it—tried to pull away. I wanted him to fill me so badly—and I knew as soon as I had what I wanted, this would all come to an end.

But my body wouldn’t let me release him, and even as the orgasm tore my heart to shreds, I knew that Mal wasn’t about to let me go either.

This was it. The thing that I most craved and the thing I most feared, all at once.

Like it or not.

“I love you,” Mal panted. “I’m always gonna love you.”

“Please!” I cried out—and in the intoxicating cocktail of pleasure and terror that had claimed us both, even I didn’t know if I meant *please, don’t leave me* or *please—give me more*.

“Ava!” He roared my name as he came. His cock swelled with cum as he released, but his arms only held me tighter. He buried hot, thick ropes of his seed deep inside me, and my cunt spasmed with dark, agonizing delight at how good it felt. How *terrible*.

Completely wrong.

Completely right.

I held him just as tight as I joined him in the orgasm. I had no choice. I knew that Mal's soul would leave his body when the pleasure came to an end—but as we reveled in it together, it was *my* soul I felt straining against the confines of my bones and muscle and skin.

“Mal?” My voice was small and terrified. My body was still trembling—half with pleasure, half with fear for what I knew would come next. “Mal... Are you still with me? Mal?”

But there was no answer.

Nothing at all.

I continued to pant as the orgasm faded out.

That was it, then.

He was gone.

I kept my eyes closed tight. I couldn't bear to look down at him. Not yet. Already, my lashes were pearling with tears that I didn't bother fighting.

I deserved to cry for him. I *needed* to.

Mal was my husband. He'd given his life for...for whatever would happen next.

It was only right that I mourned him.

He'd been the love of my life—twice in this life alone. Across all the other reincarnations I'd had with him, he'd been my soulmate.

I deserved to cry, and Mal deserved my tears.

Finally, I forced my eyes open. I was terrified of what I'd find, but I knew I had to see his face again. Even if it would be one of the last times before I was forced to put on my best black dress and bury him beneath the oak tree like he'd asked.

If I didn't look now, I knew I'd never be able to.

To my relief, he looked peaceful. Happy, even. His eyes were closed like he was only sleeping. There was still a little smile on his gorgeous lips.

I could still imagine his voice. *Sure, I died, darlin'—but I died doin' what I loved.*

My lips tensed, pressing outward as my tears began to tumble down freely. My face twisted painfully. If it hadn't been so fucking sad, I might have smiled.

I liked that I'd remember him with a sense of humor, at least. He would've liked it too.

I kissed his eyelids as I cried for him, then his cheeks, then his lips.

Then...

His eyes opened.

They *opened*. Still blue. Still serene. Still bright and shining and full of life.

"That was pretty good," Mal mumbled. "Think you about fucked the life right outta me—but it was worth it."

What...?!

"You're not dead." As my tears fell down onto him, the need to cry was whisked away. I smoothed my hands down his cheeks frantically, relishing the scrape of his stubble and the warmth of his skin. Alive. He was definitely alive. "Mal. Why aren't you dead?"

"Disappointed, darlin'?" Mal arched a wry brow.

An unexpected laugh leapt from my lips.

Mal knew better than that.

"No. Just... surprised." I folded my body over his and pressed my cheek to his chest. I could hear his heartbeat, steady and strong. "And relieved. And...a little confused. But not disappointed. You could never disappoint me. You never have—you never will."

You're supposed to be dead, Mal. There was no point in saying it out loud. I didn't want to risk it, anyway—lest whatever divine power that was meant to be carrying out the terms of my family's curse heard me and woke up from its nap or something. But it was still shocking. Still true. *Why aren't you dead?*

"Maybe the Almighty is smiling down on us for a change." As Mal wrapped me up in his arms, I felt their strength. It wasn't waning anymore. Mal's hug was nice and firm—and so was his cock, still inside me. Still rock hard. "But just in case..."

His cock throbbed within me and my eyes widened.

"You want to go *again*?" I could hardly believe the gall of this man—this man, who should by all accounts be dead in my bed beneath me right now.

At least, until I reminded myself who I was talking about.

Mal was *Mal*. He didn't take shit from anyone—apparently, not even a centuries-old curse.

“Don’t see why we shouldn’t.” He rolled his body so I was beneath him. The sheets against my back were still damp from our sweat as he smirked over me. “But this time—I’m on top.”

MAL

I wasn't dead.

That, above all else, still stunned me.

I'd bedded my witch of a wife. I'd tasted her, taken her. Pumped my seed deep inside her and felt her tremble around the thickness of my cock in return. I'd claimed her lips. I'd claimed her cunt. I'd ravished every inch of her perfect body—

And I'd lived to tell the tale.

I was alive. Living. Breathing. Healthy. Whole. Better than ever, really.

But more importantly, I wasn't dead.

Almighty help me—*I wasn't dead.*

At least...

Not yet.

Two weeks had passed since that night in Ava's bed. Apparently, I was the kind of man who didn't mind pushing his luck, since I'd barely been able to keep my cock out of her ever since. After so long waiting and fretting and fearing the worst, to finally be able to feel her hot, tight pussy wrapped around me, clenching with greed as it sucked me in...

I'd never been to Heaven, mind. Most likely, when I did die, it was straight back to Hell for a bastard like me.

But between Ava's thighs, feeling her heels bounce against my ass as she moaned my name...

If I never got to Heaven, it'd be fine by me.

Heaven was in her arms, in her kiss, in her perfect fucking cunt—

That was as close to Heaven as I ever needed to get.

“You feelin’ all right, darlin’?” We were at the farmer’s market, manning Ava’s flower stall together. She looked pale and a little nervous. I had no idea why.

Things had been going well lately. Surprisingly well, even. There hadn’t been another sighting of Raph—or any other angels, for that matter—since the last incident. Nor had we received any news of rumors about us from Hell. Don and Bea were keeping everything in running order down below. Meanwhile, Hell’s demons were still under the impression that I was on business up here on Earth, tempting souls and peddling sin.

I’d had the Malebranche double their patrols around Greenriver anyway. Could never be too careful. With Luke, Evie, Lock and Joan here as well, we were as well defended as we’d ever been.

Plus, I was alive.

Couldn’t forget about that.

“Hon?” I laid a hand Ava’s shoulder when she didn’t respond. She was staring off into the distance, looking positively fretful. “You okay?”

She startled in response, like I’d nearly scared her ghost right out of her body.

Whatever she had on her mind, it must’ve been big enough to get lost in.

“Sorry,” she said as she collected herself. “I was just...thinking.”

“Worryin’, ya mean.” I pointed to her face and shook my finger at it. “I can see it in ya. What’s the matter? Can I help?”

“Maybe.” She tried to rake her fingers through her wild red curls, then grimaced as they stuck in a tangle. I shifted behind her as she lowered her hand again and set about teasing the tangle free. “I’ve been nervous about telling you, but—”

“Ava, sweetie!” A brunette woman waved enthusiastically from the front of the booth. “Can I get a dozen irises? The last ones you sold me lasted *ages*, but they’re finally wilted now and I’m chompin’ at the bit for more!”

“Sorry. Hold that thought,” Ava told me, deflating. She put on a cheery grin as she turned to her customer. “Coming right up, Becky!”

I held that thought all morning, as fate would have it. We were hit with a near-constant rush of customers that didn’t let up until well past lunch.

While Ava dealt with the last of the horde, I ducked out to grab us a couple of burgers from the food truck on the other side of the marketplace.

The whole way there and the whole way back, I was left wondering what Ava was fretting about. There was the usual host of concerns—angels, demons, Leviathan and, of course, why I hadn't died yet.

But at least with that last point, I knew I could assuage her worries.

If something wasn't broke, there was no point in trying to fix it.

I was alive and feeling better than ever. Over the last two weeks, I'd even stopped being surprised when I woke up still breathing.

Until that started to change, stressing over it was just burning through energy we didn't need to expend.

I unwrapped my burger as I neared our booth again, mulling over the last of Ava's potential anxieties.

We hadn't heard from her mother since the night we made love for the first time. Ava had called, but no one had answered. She'd waited for her Ma to show up at the flower shop. She'd gone to Morgana's cottage, but it was all locked up tight. Her sisters had no idea where their mother had gone.

It was like she'd vanished into thin air—and just when we'd been hoping to ask her why the curse hadn't kicked in, too.

That had to be it, I decided.

Morgana had put us through our fair share of shit lately, but even so—poor Ava must've just been worried about her ma.

I was mighty pleased with myself as I crossed the final little alley between booths on my way back to her. I couldn't exactly track her mother down myself, but if we sent word to Don, he could probably take a little time off from his busy schedule to duck through the Abyss and check out Morgana's usual haunts.

I smiled as I caught Ava's eyes. If we could find her mother, she'd feel a lot better. Then, we could get back to doing what we liked best: each other.

But my smile turned to a scowl in a flash as the shoulder of a passerby caught me in the chest, knocking me back a few steps. *Rude motherfucker...*

Worse, I dropped my burger. I could always go back and get another, but it was a shame. I hadn't even taken a bite of it yet.

“Were you raised in a barn?” I snapped at the man as I bent down to pick the burger back up. It was headed straight for the trash, of course, but it wasn’t like I was gonna leave it there for someone else to deal with. “I think you owe me an—”

“Hello, Mal.”

I looked up just in time to see a pair of black eyes staring down at me. In the same moment, a sinister buzzing filled my ears—and the sharp tip of a longsword caught me beneath the chin.

“Beelzebub,” I swore. “Fuck are you doin’ here?”

I tried not to swallow as he leveraged the sword’s tip to lift my chin, bringing me back to my full height.

“I think you might have some idea,” he said—and I did.

I just didn’t like it.

My eyes darted to the left and the right. The Malebranche hadn’t missed Beelzebub’s entrance. They were already weaving their way through the oblivious townsfolk on their way over—and not a minute too soon.

“I oughta twist yer head clean off yer neck for showin’ up here,” I growled at Zeb, taking a step back in preparation for what would hopefully be a clean, quick fight. There were twelve of us, not counting Ava—and only one of him so far as I could see.

Unfortunately, as I felt more cold steel against the back of my neck, I quickly came to the conclusion that this wasn’t going to be nearly that simple.

“Malacoda,” a familiar voice, brash as a trumpet’s blare, sneered in my ear. “It’s been a while.”

“Gabriel,” I grunted through my teeth. “Well then. Looks like we’re about to have ourselves a proper party, huh?”

My pulse picked up in my chest. My heart hammered hard like a clumsy toddler on a drum kit.

This was bad—but we still weren’t outnumbered.

At least, not until I spotted a host of wings swooping down from overhead—some feathery and white, some black as pitch.

Fuck.

My eyes darted over Beelzebub’s shoulder, searching for Ava. I needed to make sure she was safe. But before I could spot her, two more figures stepped in, blocking my line of sight.

One was golden-haired and scowling. The other had salt-and-pepper hair, an immaculate goatee and piercing blue eyes.

The Archangel Michael and Leviathan—together, in the flesh.

“You’ve caused Heaven a lot of grief during your time on Earth, Malacoda.” Michael shook his head, tutting. “I’m not exactly happy to be here.”

“Then leave.” I cocked my head to the side, toward the marketplace’s main exit. “Both of ya should. We don’t want you fuckers here either.”

“Oh, well, in *that* case, we’ll just be on our way, then.” Leviathan laughed like he’d just told the world’s cleverest joke. “We’re here for a reason, Mal. The same reason, incidentally. Fancy that.”

“And I don’t imagine either of us will be leaving until one of us has gotten what we came for,” Michael added, glancing to Leviathan. “How strange, to find ourselves on the same page for once.”

Leviathan shrugged. “I’m just impressed that after thousands of years of cosmic illiteracy, you finally managed to catch up.”

Around us, the winged angels and demons were swooping down. There were more than enough to keep the Malebranche busy and at a distance. Maybe even enough to incapacitate them fully.

The townsfolk were still oblivious to everything going on. Angels, demons—they couldn’t see any of this at all.

Almighty, how I envied them.

The more I took in, the more my stomach filled with dread.

“What’s going on here?” Ava shouted from behind Leviathan and Michael.

They turned and parted just enough that I could see her rushing forward, tearing her apron off as she approached.

“I think you know, Ava,” Michael said. “And now, so do we.”

“Know what?” I snapped at him. I looked to Ava. “What’s he know?”

“The same thing we all know, Mal.” Beelzebub grinned at me as he trailed the tip of his sword down my neck to my chest. “Except for you, apparently. Hilarious, really, if she hasn’t told you yet.”

“It’s time to choose a side, Ava,” said Michael. “Not just you, but Joan, and Beatrice, and Evelyn as well. When Raphael warned us of your marriage, we were willing to stand back for a time and give you the benefit of the doubt. The curse on your bloodline—”

“Ah, yes.” Leviathan chuckled knowingly. “The Green family curse. I *have* been wondering how that would turn out.”

“What would you know about the curse?” Ava asked.

“Oh, more than I’d like,” he said. “Now, at least.”

Ava’s face contorted with confusion. “What do you mean?”

Michael held up a hand. “Enough of this. I have no interest in Leviathan’s knowledge of petty witches and their curses. I’m here to inform you that Heaven has humored this marriage for long enough. What’s done is done. Now, we’re all at an impasse—ready to fight a war that we can’t even begin yet. If we fight over you here, before the Riders are free to sweep the Earth and prepare it for battle, the Almighty will strike us all down. So. It’s time for diplomacy instead. You need to make a choice.”

“Heaven or Hell,” said Leviathan. “The true Hell, of course—not this silly temptation and free will business that Lucifer and his allies have built.”

“I’ve already made my choice.” Ava held her head high. Despite the danger all around us, her voice didn’t tremble. She didn’t stutter. I’d never had a chance to crown her as my queen, but it didn’t matter. She was acting like one now. She did me proud. “We all have.”

“And?” Leviathan asked expectantly.

“We choose Earth,” she said. “This is our home. We’re not letting you destroy it—either of you.” She gave Michael a pointed look. “So if you’re not going to kill us, then you can leave. We have other things to do today.”

Almighty help me. This was a side of Ava I’d never seen before. Formidable. Unyielding. There wasn’t a lick of anger in her voice—she was stern, and almost serene in her firmness.

That woman—the one calmly dismissing both angels and demons in a single breath—that was my wife.

I didn’t know what had gotten into her, but it only made me love her all the more.

Leviathan and Michael, unfortunately, weren’t nearly so impressed.

“Earth is not a choice,” Michael said. “But if you and the others will agree to align yourselves with Heaven, I can promise that when we fight Hell in the great final battle here, we will restore order to your world once and for all.”

“Order. Right.” I snorted. Michael had some interesting ideas about what *order* meant. The complete obliteration of full knowledge and free will, for a start. “He’s talkin’ bullshit, Ava. You don’t gotta decide nothin’. You heard him. The Riders don’t have what they need to set out yet.” Until Ava was pregnant, there was still the last seed to be sown before the Riders could even begin preparing for that: mine. “These shits-for-brains ain’t got nothin’. Apocalypse ain’t even in the bag.”

Michael turned to me with narrowed eyes. “You really *don’t* know yet, do you?”

“Dammit! Know *what*?” I barked—only to feel Zeb and Gabriel both press their swords more firmly against my neck.

I would’ve liked a second to mull all their vagueness over, but it was a little hard to think with a sword at my throat, another at my spine, and two uppity assholes making demands of my wife.

“Mal does have a point, Ava,” Leviathan said, seizing the moment. “Heaven’s so-called *order* on Earth won’t leave you with anything even beginning to resemble the world you love.”

“Neither would your chaos and destruction,” said Ava. “I already know your game, Leviathan. I want to save the world—you want to end it.”

“And with the power that I’d have at my fingertips in the aftermath, I could remake it anew,” Leviathan said. “Only better. A man could be compelled to do just about anything for the right person—say, for example, his daughter?”

Ava’s eyes widened. Her face went pale.

I didn’t blame her one bit.

I could feel the color draining from my cheeks as well.

“You’re implying—” she started.

“No. I’m saying it outright.” Leviathan held out a hand to her. “You’re my daughter, Ava. I know of your family’s curse because it’s been chasing me since the moment your mother tricked me into bed with her on the night you were conceived.”

“You—you’re my—” Ava was stammering again. She looked entirely in shock.

“Your father, yes. Join me now and I’ll give you whatever you like once the end of days is done.” With his other hand, he reached into his pocket and pulled out a little silk pouch. “I hold the souls of the Four Riders, recall—the ones that will come to claim the four prophesized

children when they come of age. The Riders are entirely at my command. Wouldn't you like to have a say in *how* they're claimed? If so—"

"I think she'd rather side with the ones who can be trusted to keep their word," Michael interrupted. He held his hand out to Ava as well. "Father or not, he'll stab you in the back as soon as he gets what he wants. Side with Heaven and, with the help of the children, we'll have a fighting chance. The world doesn't have to end at all, Ava. We can simply change it for the better. Together."

"I...I don't..." Ava looked between Leviathan's and Michael's hands, then shifted her eyes up to me.

There was fear there. The warranted kind. I wasn't afraid of the swords at my neck, but Ava clearly was—and I didn't much like the idea of leaving her to deal with whatever the fuck was going on presently all on her own.

Michael, giving her the chance to align with Heaven and save the world—at the cost of everything she loved about it.

Leviathan—her father, of all things, if anything he said could truly be trusted—offering her the chance to build a whole new world from the ashes when this one was gone.

It was a lot to take in. A hell of a lot more to have to decide between—especially since she'd already damn well *told* them her choice.

And that was *with* whatever secret knowledge everyone else but me was apparently party to.

I still didn't even know what I didn't know yet.

"She needs time," I finally grunted as words seemed to fail her. "All the ladies will. Y'all can't just go swoopin' in and dumpin' all yer highfalutin' offers on her with no warning like this. She'll need to talk to her friends so they can all decide together. Obviously." I gave both Leviathan and Michael a seething glare. "So take off and come back when you've learned some manners. My ma might not be the most hands-on of mothers, but I swear to the Almighty, y'all weren't raised right."

"Fine." Michael waved his hand like the timing of the decision didn't matter to him at all. "Think about it—just be sure, when you've made your decision, it's one you can live with."

"I'll wait for a little while. For you, Ava," Leviathan said. "But not for long. I'll be returning tonight to hear what you decide. To your cottage, I

think. I do like the idea of finally seeing the place my daughter calls home.”

“Then we’ll return tonight as well.” He nodded over my shoulder to Gabriel. A moment later, the sword at my spine moved away.

“Beelzebub—you too,” Leviathan ordered.

Zeb looked disappointed, but lowered his blade and stepped back.

Ava and I both breathed a sigh of relief.

“Good. That just leaves one more thing.” Leviathan’s hand shot out at me, faster than I could track. Instead, I shifted my gaze to his face in confusion.

On his lips, there was an oozing smirk.

“Sorry, Mal,” he told me. “But we won’t be needing you anymore.”

Something had passed through my shirt and into my chest. As it slid back out, my breath left my lungs with a heavy *huh*. Meanwhile, my brain reeled as it tried to process this information. It was...a dagger, maybe? The flash of silver in Leviathan’s hand told me that was probably what had done it.

A moment later, the pain hit me, which just about confirmed it. It was a sharp, searing kind of hurt that thundered its way through my body with every heartbeat.

My head was still catching up, though. A dagger. Through my chest. *Huh*.

Probably, then, that wasn’t anything good at all.

My vision blurred, then came back into focus. My body swayed back and forth like the swinging doors of an old saloon, stirred by the wind.

I sought out Ava and found her eyes locked on me. We stared at each other for a moment that could’ve been a few seconds, could’ve been half an eternity.

Whatever she saw as she looked me over made her open her mouth in an ear-splitting scream.

Time stilled further at the sound. The ground beneath my feet vibrated in the rhythm of an oncoming earthquake. The air rang, rippling with a windless breeze that plucked feathers from the wings of angels and demons alike, but left the banners and humans of the farmer’s market entirely untouched.

Ava’s red curls rose up all around her head, suspended by an unseen force. Her feet levitated a few inches off the ground. Her expression was

marred by a rage-filled pain—heartache and hurt.

When I raised my hand to my chest, I felt blood. It was strange, though—my body was warm and hot all at once. Beyond that, there was no hurt in me at all now.

Somehow, that seemed like it was worse than feeling all the hurt in the world.

I didn't know what it was that Ava was doing, but it had the angels and demons around us all in a proper tizzy. Michael and Gabriel exchanged a nervous glance, then waved for their forces and took flight. Beelzebub had already booked it. The rest of the demons were beginning to flee as well.

Leviathan was the last to take off. He stood on shaky legs, wincing at the vibrations and the sound.

"You really are my daughter," he roared to Ava over the sound of her scream, then gritted his teeth and shoved his hands in his pockets. "If you needed proof—there it is. My blood is in your veins. So is my power." He bowed his head to her, then closed his eyes—and vanished.

Ava's scream died off a moment later. Her feet returned to the ground. She looked terrified.

She looked exhausted.

Though Leviathan was gone now, his voice lingered:

"See you tonight."

Only the Malebranche were still standing in the midst of milling townsfolk when it was all done. It seemed nice of Ava to spare my men along with the other humans. She hadn't even disturbed the final hours of the farmer's market.

It was sweet, really. Lovely of her. Considerate. Kind.

I sank to my knees as they gave out beneath me, then found myself falling backwards.

I was tired now, too.

"Mal!" As Ava sank to the ground next to me and took me into her arms, her hair was still floating all around her like she was underwater. The tears that welled up in her eyes when she glanced down at my chest told me all I needed to know.

The dagger. The blood. The strange sensations moving through my body and the sudden absence of hurt.

I was dying.

Of course I was.

That curse on her family hadn't been broken—it just hadn't quite managed to catch up to me yet.

“H-hey there, darlin’.” My hands were shaking as I raised them to her cheeks. “God, yer pretty. Prettiest thing I’ve ever known.”

“Stay with me, Mal,” she begged me through a sob. “I don’t want to lose you. I *can’t* lose you—not now.”

“I’m tryin’, Ava. Say... What was the... the thing?” I asked her. I tried to work my fingers into her hair, just to hold her for a little while longer, but keeping my arms raised up took more energy than my body had left in it now. They fell uselessly to my sides as my heart pumped its blood out onto my shirt instead of through my veins. “The thing I don’t know. Didn’t...didn’t like that. Not knowin’. Will ya tell me, before I go?”

“I’m pregnant, Mal.” Ava choked, then swallowed. Her tears fell down onto my cheeks, searing hot drops of rain. “I was trying...trying to tell you before. I’ve been trying all day, and now...”

My lips were stiff and heavy. Hard to move. But in spite of that, I found the energy to shift them into a smile.

My Ava. My soulmate. My wife. Ava, pregnant with my child. Pretty Ava in a white dress and a crown of wildflowers, with a swollen belly and an expecting mother’s glow. Hungry Ava, ransacking the fridge at midnight to satisfy her pregnancy cravings—sleepy Ava, warm and exhausted, curled up safe and sound in her bed for a much-needed rest. My mind was flooded with sweet visions of her in a future that was worthy of her.

It was a future that I wouldn’t be able to share with her. Already, my hands were numb. My feet might as well have been made of lead.

Things were fading now. In the end, the curse of the Green witches had finally claimed what it was owed.

But I’d leave a part of me here with her. A little chubby-fisted baby, half mine and half hers. Our friends would protect it. So would Ava’s ma, and all the other Seventh Daughters too.

I was going to die a father, in the arms of the woman I loved more than life itself.

So that was all right.

It was all gonna be all right.

“Kiss me, darlin’.” I should’ve been crying too, I knew, but the tears just wouldn’t come. A feeling of complete serenity had passed over me.

Maybe from all the times I'd prepared for this moment in the past. Maybe it was just a little taste of the Almighty's grace. "I love ya. Love you both. So dry...dry your tears." My tongue felt awkward in my mouth, thick and unwieldy, but I pressed on. "I love ya, so kiss me while I go."

"I don't want you to go! I want you to stay here with me, you...you bastard!" Ava gave my chest a thump with her fist and I coughed a laugh.

It tasted like blood.

"That I may be," I murmured. "But I'm still yers. So kiss me. I can't stay, but there're worse...worse ways to go."

Ava curled in her lips and screwed up her face, then buried it in my chest.

"I love you too, Mal." She panted gently as she came back up for air. Her tears were still falling, but I could tell how hard she was trying to hold them at bay. "I'm going to miss you."

"I'll miss you more, darlin'," I promised her. "But sometime—a long time from now, I hope, but someday—I think I'll be seein' you again."

She kissed me then, finally. She kissed me exactly the way I wanted—passionate and hard. Like I wasn't dying. Like right here in the marketplace of Greenriver, we might be about to make love instead.

She kissed me and all the heaviness in my body slipped away. I was no angel. I knew I wasn't about to go getting my wings or any of that silly old shit. I wasn't Luke. I wasn't Lock.

I was Malacoda of the Malebranche. I'd lived as a demon. I'd die as a man. I'd had a long, satisfying life—longer than a bastard like me deserved.

And for all the best parts of it, I'd lived in the light of Ava's love.

She kissed me and that light engulfed me, even as I closed my eyes.

On that day in the far future when we finally met again, I'd kiss her then, too. Only next time, it wouldn't be me tracking her down.

Next time, she'd come and find me.

AVA

The Malebranche took the banner down from my booth. They hefted Mal's body onto it and, between the eleven of them, used it to carry him away from the marketplace.

I didn't know what else to do other than follow them.

I didn't know what I was supposed to do anymore at all.

The whistle of the wind in my ears was hollow as a conch shell. It sounded like a distant ocean, its waves crashing on a faraway shore.

My feet moved forward, one in front of the other. I didn't tell them to. They only went. The only feeling I had that connected me to my body was the coldness in my hands. I was pretty sure that was just shock—shock, or something beyond it.

Mal was dead. Only a little while ago, he'd been smiling at me. Cracking jokes. Laughing at how silly we'd been to really think that some ancient curse could actually kill a man like him.

But now, the only part of him that still lived was inside my womb. Another Green family baby who would be raised with no father.

If I didn't think of a way to evade both the angels and Leviathan's forces before they came for me tonight, I knew they'd be raised without a mother as well.

The Malebranche brought us back to my cottage. The walk must have taken hours—my land wasn't exactly close to town. But with the warped timepiece of my mind in its current state, it only felt like mere minutes

had passed before I found myself back at my mailbox, staring at the banner that they'd hoisted Mal's body up in as they laid it down on the grass of my front lawn.

At some point, the cottage's door must have opened. I saw Bea, Joan and Evie running towards me. I felt their embraces wrap around me. I watched their lips move, but whatever words of reassurance and sympathy were pouring out of them, I was too far gone to hear.

Dead. Mal was dead.

Mal was gone, and I was left here with his child, trapped between a Heaven that only wanted to take it from me and a fallen angel who wanted it to drag the entire world into a new state of Hell.

A fallen angel who'd called himself my father.

How unfair was that? Leviathan himself had somehow managed to avoid the consequences of my mother's curse, but Mal—Mal, who'd only ever been good and kind and loving to me—had succumbed to it like all the rest.

I didn't remember moving to kneel at his body. But I felt the coolness of the grass and the firmness of the earth beneath my knees.

I didn't remember bowing down to press my mouth to his cold, lifeless lips. But I felt the hands on my shoulders, pulling me away from him as I placed kiss after useless kiss against his skin—like this was some kind of fairytale. Like I truly believed that true love's kiss could somehow bring him back to me.

Of course, it didn't work.

This wasn't a fairytale, and there would be no happy ending. Not now.

Mal was dead. *Dead dead dead dead—*

"Ava." My mother's voice in my ear cut off the broken record of bad thoughts. "Ava, stop."

I froze.

"Where have you been?" I asked without looking up.

It was definitely her. I could smell the patchouli and amber of her perfume. But I couldn't look at her. Not right now.

I couldn't take my eyes off Mal. I didn't dare.

Maybe if I watched him long enough, he'd open his eyes again. *Sorry, darlin', he'd say. That was a mean joke, I know—but I sure gotcha this time, didn't I?*

“I left to search for Leviathan.” Mom squeezed my shoulder in a way that might’ve been reassuring under better circumstances. “When you mentioned him that night, I left to seek him out right away. I was hoping I would find him before...”

Her voice trailed off. Stiffly, I nodded. I knew what she meant.

Before he showed up here.

I bowed my head and kissed Mal again. Harder, this time. More desperately.

I’d try anything, if it meant there was even the slightest chance that he’d come back to me when I was done.

“It’s no use, Ava.” Mom tugged me away from him once more. “That’s not the way.”

“Then tell me what is.” My own voice sounded like it was being projected from the other side of my lawn. It didn’t feel like it came from my throat. It felt like it came from the lips of another, too far away for me to reach. “I want to bring him back. Tell me how to bring him back.”

“There *is* a way,” my mother said—and just like that, my vision focused. My ears stopped ringing. My soul returned to my body once more.

She was kneeling at my side, clutching my shoulders tight like she wanted to shake me. Standing around us were my friends and their children and their husbands. They were all staring—not that I cared.

I didn’t care about anything at all anymore. Only Mal, who was dead, and our baby, who was still nine months away from being born.

But as I scanned all the faces, I caught sight of an unfamiliar one. She was beautiful, with long, dark hair and intensely red lips.

As I gawked at her, for a moment, her eyes were deep blue. Just like his were—like his had been. I blinked, and the color was gone—but for that precious moment, I saw some flicker of Mal in her eyes that gave me the strangest, most fleeting sense of hope I’d ever felt.

“I didn’t find Leviathan in time,” Mom said. “But I found someone else along the way. Someone who can help.”

“Belial?” I asked. A guess. Short of a hallucination, I couldn’t imagine any other reason I would have seen that fragment of my dead husband in her eyes.

She bowed her head and gave me a tender smile.

“That’s me,” she said. “It’s nice to finally meet you, Ava. I hear you’re going to become a mother.”

“Yeah,” I said dully. “I hear you were never a very good one.”

It was cruel, maybe, but I was too far gone to care about cruel right now.

My words earned me a laugh from her.

“No, I wasn’t,” she agreed. “But I’m hoping that today, I might be able to change that.”

“I told you I was looking for a way to bring Mal back,” my mother whispered. She inclined her head toward Belial. “Imagine my surprise when the way found me instead.”

“You,” I rasped at Belial. “You can do it? You can raise the dead?”

“Oh, no.” She laughed again. “Only the angel Gabriel can do that. He’s cute, from what I can remember. Plays the trumpet. Quite good at it, too.”

“Then why are you here?” My voice was an accusation. A well-deserved one, too.

Mal had never spoken highly of his mother. From what he’d told me, she’d been as absent as my own father had been.

My father. Leviathan.

The man who’d stolen my husband’s life away just to watch how much it would hurt me as Mal died in my arms.

“We live in a universe that operates on sacrifice,” Belial explained. She knelt across from me, bowing over Mal’s body, and brushed his auburn hair away from his face. “I never liked that much. It’s an awful lot of work—you can imagine it, can’t you? So many lambs hauled up to mountaintops to pay for man’s sins. So many sons and daughters given up for the cause.”

I stared at her, unmoved. Whatever shit she was selling, I didn’t want to hear her marketing pitch.

“Tell me how to bring him back.”

“Impatient girl,” she scoffed fondly, still stroking Mal’s hair. “I am. I just did. *Sacrifice*. That Hammurabi boy knew what he was talking about, you know. An eye for an eye. A life for a life.”

“You’ll die so that he can live?” My suspicion was clear in my tone. Belial was a fallen angel. A mother of demons. She didn’t strike me as the self-sacrificing type.

“Oh, Heavens no,” she cooed. “That would be ridiculous—and a bit melodramatic, frankly. No. I won’t die for my son. But...”

She reached up to her chest, just below her collarbone. I watched her fingers pass through her skin like a hot knife through warm butter. When she withdrew them again, she held a white poker chip between her long, red fingernails. It was marked with a dark red lipstick print.

“I can live for him.”

“Belial has agreed to give up her immortality to bring Mal back,” Mom explained. “She’ll have to live out the rest of her days as a human, but as far as I can tell, it should work.”

“Do it, then.” A challenge. A dare. I could feel the hope bubbling up inside me already, but I couldn’t risk letting it until I saw proof. If that hope turned out to be misplaced, I knew it would only shatter my heart all over again—and if that happened, I didn’t know that there were enough pieces left for me to put back together in the aftermath. “Bring him back.”

“It’s not quite that easy, Ava. We’ll need magic to make it take,” Mom said. “We’ll take him to the grove of the Seventh Daughters. Together—all of us—”

She gestured to the woods at the edge of my property, where women in black cloaks stood solemnly. I spotted Neity and all the others—the women who had raised me. The coven that I’d pushed away for binding Mal and me to this fate.

And now, they were here to help.

Fancy that.

“We’ll need to complete a ritual to call Mal back to his body—tonight. It has to be tonight, before he’s too far gone to save.” Mom pressed her hand to my heart. “And we’ll need you for that. You’re his soulmate. He lives on in your love. We have all the pieces we need. It’s a full moon tonight—good for spell work. Now, we just need a little time to wait for it to rise in the sky and—”

“We don’t have time,” I said abruptly. “Leviathan’s here in Greenriver with an army of demons. The angels are here, too. None of them wanted to risk hurting the baby by taking me by force—but they will if they have to. They’re coming for me tonight. For Joan, and for Bea and Abbie, and for Evie and Lily too. They want us to decide which side we’re on.” I met my mother’s gaze and shook my head. Already, the bubbles of hope within me

were popping. One. By. One. “We don’t have time for a ritual. We don’t have time for anything at all.”

“Leviathan’s here? You spoke with him?” Mom blinked in surprise. “Did he say anything about—”

“I know I’m his daughter.” I folded my hand over Mal’s chest, where the blood was still tacky. Still warm. “Nice of you to keep that from me.”

“Would it have helped you at all if you’d known?” Mom asked.

“Not really.” I wished I cared. I wished I’d had the energy or the mind to scream at her for keeping something like that a secret from me—but I didn’t. Mal was dead, and something important inside me had died with him. “Why isn’t he dead? Every man you’ve slept with is supposed to be dead.”

I wished he would have died. If the curse had killed him, Mal would still be here with me.

Instead, my father lived on, and Mal was growing colder by the second. Soon, there wouldn’t be any warmth left in him at all.

“I thought the same thing myself for a long time,” Mom admitted. “I... I don’t know how he managed to avoid it. When I met him all those years ago, I realized who he was. I thought that if I tricked him into bed with me, I’d be gaining my seventh daughter and ridding the world of a great evil all at once. Unfortunately...”

“You were only half right. And now Mal is dead, and he’s not.” I stared at her, unblinking. If Leviathan had died like he was supposed to, would it have changed anything? Maybe. Maybe not. “He’s the one who killed Mal, Mom. He stuck his dagger through Mal’s heart.”

“I’m sorry, Ava. Really, I am.” She pursed her lips, then shifted closer. “But...I have a plan. Listen to me, okay?”

“I’m listening.”

“We can run,” Mom said. “There are other altars in other towns. Other Seventh Daughters who will take us in. Some of them, Greens like us, even. We can go to them, and we can keep moving. He’ll follow us, I’m sure, but he won’t be able to keep up.”

“I can take you to them,” Don called out. “Through the Abyss. We’d be cutting it close—I can’t take more than two at a time—but if we hurry—”

The ringing in my ears was returning. The cogs of my brain clicked awkwardly, like something was out of place.

Fate had killed Mal just as much as my father had.

Fate had drawn us together in the first place. My pregnancy had been a matter of destiny. All of this—every piece of it—was the result of some divine hand reaching down and pulling strings.

The angels were here for me and my baby. They were here for all of us. Fallen angels and demons, too.

The man who'd killed my husband was here in Greenriver, waiting to hear me tell him that I'd join him on his quest to end a world that I'd only ever wanted to save.

All of it...it was happening for a reason.

And just like that, the wonky cog in my brain finally lurched back into place.

"No," I panted, rising up over Mal's body. "We're not going to run."

I couldn't bring myself to look at the cold pale of Mal's face again just yet, or the bloom of blood on his chest. If Mom and Belial were right, that was all temporary. Something that they could set right if we bought them enough time.

Instead, I looked to our allies.

Luke and Lock, who had the powers of Heaven in their hands once again. Two fallen angels, returned to grace.

Don, who was still a demon, and Evie, who'd once been queen of Hell.

As she summoned an orb of hellfire held between her manicured hands and a snarl on her lips, Bea looked like a female version of the Devil in her own right. She already understood what I wanted, even without me asking. She was prepared to fight. As for Joan—she'd been born ready for a brawl. She held her pistol in one hand and a ball of crackling angelic light in the other. They both were human still, but they could tap into their husbands' powers.

As for me, and Mom, and the rest of the Seventh Daughters—we had our magic.

"We stand our ground," I told them. "And we fight like Hell to keep it."

One by one, they all nodded in agreement until only Mom was left.

She rose from Mal's body and met my gaze with a strange, wild look in her eyes.

"We'll fight, Ava," she told me. "But if your father is here—if he's still alive—then the curse on him still remains. And after everything he's done...I think we owe him a little more than *just* a fight."

THROUGH THE ABYSS, Don brought my sisters to Mom's cottage in twos and threes and fours. Zara came with her triplets, who took to Abbie and Lily immediately. Don wrangled Tanya and Isla from Hong Kong. Sonia, Dana and Marie came from New York, straight from a party at a nightclub.

Mom dressed them in the black cloaks of the Seventh Daughters. I had a cloak of my own wrapped around my shoulders. With our hoods down and our red hair flowing free, as I looked around, it was like being in a room full of mirrors. We all might've had different fathers, but at a glance, we were almost identical.

I was the only one of us who had Mom's magic, but her blood ran strong through every one of us. We had similar enough looks that, if we were lucky tonight, Mom's plan just might work.

"There." Mom nodded as she finished clasping Marie's cloak around her neck. She stepped back to admire her handiwork. "That's perfect. They'll never know the difference until it's far too late."

"When we finish bringing Mal back, he won't even know which one of you he married at this rate," Belial said with a laugh.

"Oh, he'll know," I assured her. There wasn't a doubt in my mind. "Your son's spent his entire life tracking me down in every incarnation I've ever lived. I'm pretty sure at this point, he could pick me out with his hands tied in a pitch black room."

"We need to keep Ava at the altar to make this work," Mom informed us. She marched through our ranks like a general commanding her troops as the little girls played together in the living room. "Her presence is important, both to draw Leviathan in and to bring Mal back. And we'll need Evie and Lily, Bea and Abbie, and Joan with us, too."

"If he wants all of us, then he'll get all of us." Joan cracked her knuckles as her lips curled in an easy smile. "Dumb bastard. You'd think after all these years feeding on the suffering of humans here on Earth, he would've learned not to bite off more than he can chew."

"Aye, we'll give him somethin' to chew on," Lock said at Joan's side. "We've got Legion, the Malebranche, and all the forces of Hell we could muster to fight angels and turncoat demons alike on the frontlines."

"Which leaves me and Lock to help deal with the rest," said Luke. "Mammon isn't likely to dirty his hands with battle, but we should expect appearances from Beelzebub, Michael and Gabriel as well as Leviathan. They'll all want to get as close to Ava and the others as they can."

“Lucky us, huh?” Evie cast a nervous glance to the little girls in the living room. They were gathered around a lantern chanting something sinisterly in their little voices—like they’d already formed a coven of their own. “I still don’t like the idea of using Lily and Abbie as bait.”

“And I don’t like that I’ll be leading our enemies right to them,” Don said with a glower. He turned to my sisters, looking grim. “The Abyss is a strange place for humans to travel, so I need you all to be prepared. If you see any phantoms, ignore them. They can’t hurt you, and paying them any mind will only slow us down. But most importantly, when I take you through it, I’ll need you to stick close to me. I can’t have you wandering—we won’t have the time for it.”

“Looking like that...I don’t think sticking close to *you* will be a problem at all.” Marie batted her fake lashes at Don, which earned her an eye roll from him—and a sour look from Bea.

“Oh, honey. Look at you and your bright ideas.” A wickedness flickered in Bea’s gaze as she summoned a ball of hellfire into the palm of her hand. “You know what they say about playing with fire, don’t you?”

Marie’s eyebrows shot up as she stared into Bea’s flames. She swallowed hard, then cleared her throat.

“Right. On second thought—hands to myself.” Marie nodded rapidly. “Got it. Loud and clear.”

“I have flares for each of you.” Mom handed each of my sisters a long, skinny tube with bright red tissue paper poking out of one end. “You’ll each take your positions between Ava’s cottage and the Seventh Daughters’ altar in the woods. When you spot one of our enemies approaching you, light the flare and start firing off rounds skyward as you flee. Don will find you through the Abyss and bring you back here before you’re in any real danger.”

“These aren’t flares, Mom,” Dana pointed out. “They’re Roman candles. Don’t you have anything more...*magicky* for us to use?”

“Yeah, and what happens if we *do* get into real danger?” Sonia asked.

“Then point the fireworks at whatever’s threatening you,” Mom said with a shrug. “Angels, demons...it doesn’t matter. They’ll still burn.”

“Besides,” said Belial, “anyone who’s chasing you will think that you’re Ava. The angels can’t harm you because they’ll think you’re with child—they’d never dare hurt a pregnant woman. As for the demons, they *won’t* harm you for the exact same reason.”

“Our grandchild is precious to them,” Mom said with a strange tinge of pride in her voice. “The silly creatures really think it has the power to help them end the world.”

“When we’ve finished luring them to the sacred glade with Ava’s doppelgangers, Lock and I will put an end to Beelzebub,” Luke said. “That should leave Don free to get Abbie and Lily away once Leviathan rears his ugly head. As for the angels—”

“Oh, don’t worry about the angels.” Mom laughed like she knew the punchline of a joke that no one had told yet. “We should be finished resurrecting Mal by then. Belial and I will deal with them.”

“Deal with them *how*?” I asked, dubious. “From what I’ve heard of the angels, they’re not exactly easy prey.”

“No,” Lock confirmed. “They’re no’ in the least. And once Mal is resurrected, Belial will be human again, if the two of ye will recall.”

Mom and Belial shared a smug, sparkling look.

“You just let us take care of Gabriel and Michael,” Belial said with a smirk.

“We did a little fortune-telling while Don was fetching the girls here,” Mom explained. “Belial’s taught me a few new tricks. Trust me—the angels won’t be the problem tonight.”

“Right...” I said slowly. I still wasn’t sold on this, but if Mom and Belial had been reading palms or tarot cards or whatever it was that witches and fallen angels did when they schemed together, I supposed I’d just have to trust that they knew what they were talking about. “Then that leaves...Leviathan, I guess.”

“And he’ll be the biggest problem of them all,” said Luke. “He has the souls of the Four Riders at his command. That means they’ll be ready to fight on his orders.”

“And knowing him, he’ll wait until the very last minute to make himself known,” Don added. “If we’re lucky, we can get him to monologue for a bit. He’s full of himself—and I’ve never met anyone who’s enjoyed the sound of their own voice more.”

“Mm. So he hasn’t changed a bit, in that case,” Mom said—almost fondly. “We’ll need all hands on deck to deal with the Riders until we can lure Leviathan to where we need him.”

“And you’ll have them,” Joan said with confidence. “I still owe Leviathan one from that time he kidnapped me.”

“And *I* still owe him one from when he tried to force me into marrying his creepy son.” Bea shot me an apologetic smile. “Sorry, Aves, but your half-brother was always a big weird creep.”

“Let’s not go calling Simon my half-brother just yet,” I said, wincing. “Leviathan might be my father, but I’m pretty sure all I inherited from him was an X-chromosome.”

“Too true,” Mom agreed.

She moved to me and placed a hand on my stomach. It still felt strange, ending up on the same side as her after more than a month of being certain that she’d orchestrated all of this for some sinister personal reason—but at the end of the day, she was still my mother. Now that she was working with us to bring Mal back to life and prepare for this attack, I was slowly coming to terms with the fact that her intentions had been good all this time. She’d only been working with the information that her prophecy had provided her.

Things would probably stay awkward for a while between us, but if she could bring Mal back to me and get us all through this night alive, then I was sure we could finish reconciling when all of this was finally done.

“You’ve made me proud, Ava,” she told me with a gentle smile. “You always have—and tonight, more than ever, I see all the best parts of myself here in you.”

“Let’s hope they stay there, then. If we can all manage to keep all our parts inside us, then I’ll consider tonight a win.” I took a deep breath, then nodded to our little group of co-conspirators. “It’s time. Let’s do this.”

AVA

On the stone altar in the sacred clearing of the Seventh Daughters, we placed Mal's body.

Already, back at my cottage where the trap we'd laid for our enemies began, I knew my sisters were already on the run.

The moon gleamed high overhead like a silver dollar. All around the altar, the Seventh Daughters chanted in Latin, solemn and low:

"Vita ad vitam. Vita ad vitam."

Mom turned to Belial and held out her hand.

"Do you still have that chip of yours?"

"I do," said Belial. She pulled the poker chip from the pocket of her gown and placed it on my mother's palm. There was a small, gentle smile on her lips as she stared down at Mal's body. "And I give it willingly in sacrifice to my son. As you say—*vita ad vitam*."

"Vita ad vitam!" the Seventh Daughters echoed. Their voices were growing louder now. Their outstretched palms were beginning to fill with a wan, golden glow. *"Anima ad animam!"*

Life to life.

Soul to soul.

Lock trudged to the edge of our circle as the Seventh Daughters continued their chant. He leaned down over my shoulder and rumbled an update in my ear.

“The fighting’s started out on the edge of yer property, lass,” he told me. “Legion, the Malebranche and the demon loyalists are holdin’ strong.”

“Good.” I pursed my lips, then sucked in a breath. “Do you think it’ll last?”

“We’ve run into a streak of luck, as fate would have it. Leviathan’s turncoat demons and the angels are fightin’ each other as much as they are us.” Lock chuckled. “Dumb bastards. How’s, ah...”

He nodded to Mal’s body on the altar and I gave a tiny shrug.

“Everything looks okay so far. The Seventh Daughters are just building up energy now. After that...we’ll have to wait and see.” *We’ve never done this before*, I wanted to add. *Anything could happen*. But admitting that at the moment felt like it just might jinx us—and I couldn’t risk that. Not with Mal’s life on the line. “Is Don—”

“He’s taken yer Zara and Marie back to safety already. Beelzebub, Michael and Gabriel are all in hot pursuit. Just, ah...” Lock sucked a sharp breath in through his teeth. “Maybe tell yer Seventh Daughters to hurry as much as they can, aye? It’ll be best if yer ritual’s complete before they all get here. Wouldnae want them to have a chance to interrupt.”

“We’ll do what we can.” I turned to him and forced a smile. “Thank you, Lock.”

“Tch. Isnae worth thankin’ me over.” Lock drew away to return to Joan, Bea, Evie and Luke, who were huddled around Lily and Abbie near the edge of the glade. “Oughta save our thanks for when this business is all done.”

“Ava,” Mom called out to me. Around us, the golden glow was growing stronger. “It’s time.”

I moved to her side and she handed me Belial’s chip. It was surprisingly warm against my palm.

“When I give you the signal, I need you to place this against Mal’s sternum, just beneath his collarbones,” she told me. “Hold your hand over it and focus on how you feel for him. If this works, the energy we’ve built up should open the door for him. Your love will call him back—and Belial’s soul will bind him to his body once more.”

“Okay.” I folded my fingers over the chip and held it tight. “On your signal, then.”

Mom kept her eyes on mine for a long moment. There was something in her gaze—something that she didn’t want to say out loud, either.

If this doesn't work...

I nodded in understanding. It was possible that we'd fail. It was possible that Mal was gone for good.

It was possible I'd have to live the rest of my life without him and loving Mal's baby with a broken heart.

But those were possibilities I simply couldn't entertain right now.

"I know," I told her. "So let's do this."

Mom returned my nod, then spun around to face Mal's body once more.

"Malacoda!" she called out over the altar. "Leader of the Malebranche! Scourge of Malebolge, Hell's Eighth circle! Terror of hypocrites, seducers, plunderers—" She glanced at me with a little smirk. "And sorcerers."

If the stakes had been any lower, I might have laughed at that.

Mal had certainly been a terror to me—in all the best ways.

He could terrorize me all he liked in the future, just so long as he came back to me again.

"We call you back to your body, Malacoda!" Mom cried out. "We call you by the power of the Almighty. We call you by the soul of your kin, whose blood is your own blood."

Mom looked to me—the signal.

Gently, I laid Belial's chip on Mal's chest and folded my hand over it. The chip was warm enough now to banish some of the cold from Mal's skin on contact.

That gave me hope. *This can work. This just might actually work.*

"We call you by the blood of your child, which grows in the womb of the woman you love."

"*Vita ad vitum!*" the Seventh Daughters continued to chant. "*Anima ad animam!*"

Beneath my hand, Belial's chip began to vibrate against Mal's chest.

"We call you, Malacoda," my mother sang into the night, "by the love of your wife, whose soul is bound forever to your soul both in life...and beyond death."

"*Amor ultra mortem,*" the Seventh Daughters chanted now, louder than ever. "*Amor ultra mortem! Amor ultra mortem!*"

I felt the chip slip beneath Mal's skin as they repeated the words the third time.

Mal's body was warming. As I pressed my hand more firmly against him, I could even feel a weak, flickering heartbeat.

But his eyes didn't open. His lips didn't move. I lowered my cheek over his nose, desperate to feel even the slightest whisper of breath—

But there was nothing.

His heart was beating, but he wasn't alive.

Had we failed? We'd managed to stir his heart—but apparently, that wasn't enough to bring him back. Not completely.

I looked up to my mother with barefaced terror.

"He isn't breathing," I said. "What did we do wrong?"

"Nothing, Ava." She placed a hand on my shoulder and smiled softly. "We're just not done yet."

"What else is there? I'll do anything I have to. Just tell me what—"

"Kiss him, silly girl. Like you've wanted to do from the start." Mom chuckled and nodded down to Mal's lips. "Let him feel how much he has to live for. If you'll do anything for this man, I imagine giving him a kiss isn't too much to ask."

Well, she had me there.

Kissing Mal back to life had been my first inclination when we'd gotten his body away from danger. I could still recall my mother's words when she'd stopped me: *No, Ava. It's not the way.*

Apparently, it was now.

So, no. As far as saving my husband—who I rather enjoyed kissing—went, a kiss wasn't asking much at all.

With my free hand, I smoothed Mal's hair away from his face. Even in death, he was still handsome as ever. His deep blue eyes may have been closed. But in his auburn lashes and his crooked nose, his firm jawline and his wide, firm lips, he was still the gorgeous man that I'd married.

I wanted Mal for more than just his looks, though.

I wanted him for the way he made me laugh and the way he took his coffee. I wanted more mornings with burned bacon for breakfast and more evenings in bed together, snuggled close in his arms.

I may not have wanted Malacoda, demon lord and king of Hell, to become my husband in the first place. But in the end, that wasn't really who I'd married at all.

I'd married Mal—freshly human, smirking, swaggering, and kind.

I'd married my soulmate. Not just in this life, but in every life I'd ever lived.

"Come back to me, you stupid, perfect man," I whispered over his lips. "I miss you. I need you here." My hand moved to my belly of its own accord. The tight rubber-band feeling in my womb ached for Mal just as much as my heart did. "We both do."

Then, I kissed him. Softly at first, then harder. I closed my eyes and listened to my heartbeat fluttering—with hope, and with hurt, and with nervousness, and most of all, with love.

It took a few seconds. In those few seconds, the worry coiled in my stomach started to spread.

But then, in an instant, it all faded away entirely.

His lips twitched. Just once at first, but a moment later, another occurred.

Before I knew it, Mal's fingers were in my hair. His breath was warm against my nose. His mouth began to match the movements of mine—then his tongue slipped between my lips.

He was kissing me back.

"Mal," I gasped, pulling away with surprise—but Mal didn't let that last for long.

He drew me back toward him almost immediately, kissing me again with a hunger that he obviously had no plans on denying.

That was fine by me. When he finally let his hands slip away from my scalp, all I could think about was how much I wanted to kiss him a third time—and a fourth, and a fifth, and a sixth.

"Hey, darlin'," he finally mumbled against my lips. "How you been?"

"I thought I'd lost you." I curled my fingers against his chest and rested my forehead against his neck. My breaths came rapid and sharp. When Mal had died, I'd felt dead too. Now that he was back to me, I felt like I could finally breathe again—like I was gasping for air with lungs that had been empty since he'd breathed his last. "You were gone, and I was alone, and the Malebranche started carrying your body away and—"

"Ava," Mal croaked. His throat sounded full of cobwebs, like he still had yet to cough up all the lingering vestiges of death inside him.

"Mal?" My eyes burned with tears. I hadn't cried when he'd died. I'd been so deeply in shock, I'd hardly been able to react at all. But now, I

couldn't seem to stop them from flowing. "What is it? Do you need something? Can I—"

"Ava," he said again. "Yer ramblin'. C'mere."

He pulled me to him with stiff arms. He was still a little shaky, but as I pressed my body to his, at least he felt a little less cold now.

It was a good sign.

All of this was a good sign.

"Guess I've just got a lot to say to you." Through my tears, I smiled up at him. "You've missed a lot."

"Mm. Well, ya can fill me in later. For now..." He lowered his lips down toward mine. "Shut up and kiss me again."

I gave him what he wanted immediately. Kisses and whimpers and breathy sighs—he could have it all. Anything he wanted. Anything he needed.

I could have kissed him like that all night long.

Unfortunately, that was all cut short in an instant as I felt a hand on my shoulder, squeezing it with urgency.

"Ava." Don's voice came from behind me. He was breathing hard like he was out of breath. I turned to him and found worry in his gaze.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"Michael," he panted. "And Gabriel. And Beelzebub. They've caught onto our little ruse with your sisters—and they're only a few moments away."

"The girls." I looked to Lily and Abbie, who were clinging to their mothers. "Get them out of here as soon as Beelzebub arrives—we know that Leviathan won't show up until he gets word that we're all here."

"Of course." Don peered over my shoulder toward the altar as he caught his breath. "Is Mal..."

"The ritual is over." I turned so Don could see Mal's body. Mal's eyes were still closed, but his chest was rising and falling with breath again now. "Mal's alive."

"Hey there, shithead." Mal cracked an eye open to stare up at Don with. "How've ya been?"

"Exhausted, thanks to you," Don said with a tired smirk. "But your wife here has a plan—and you've come back to the land of the living just in time to see her carry it out."

“Lucky me,” Mal murmured. He opened his other eye and shifted his gaze to me with a dopey, lopsided smile. “Lucky, lucky me.”

AVA

Beelzebub was the first to arrive—which, in a way, was a relief. The trees were filled with a whining buzz as he neared the glade. The closer he got, the louder the sound became.

When he stepped into the clearing, the source of the noise showed up with him.

Beelzebub was tall and dark-haired. His trench coat whipped around his muscular frame in the wind—and from within it, a massive swarm of black insects surged forth.

Flies.

Beelzebub's eyes scanned the scene he'd just stepped into with a sinister focus. As his gaze oozed over me, Joan, Lily and Abbie, a smile of pleasure spread across his lips.

"Looks like the gang's all here," he said to no one in particular—or so it seemed at first. "Go. Tell our mutual friend that it's time for him to come and claim what he's owed."

The swarm of flies gathered in a single black mass at his words, then took flight up over the trees and into the night.

I knew exactly who they were going to seek out.

Leviathan would receive word that all of his targets were gathered here as soon as the flies reached him—which meant it was time for Abbie and Lily to finally be taken to safety. As soon as the flies were out of sight, Don created a portal to the Abyss and whisked the girls through it.

Already, the Seventh Daughters had departed to go back to Mom's cottage, where they'd form a line of defense for the girls and my sisters—just in case.

"Oi! Over here, Zebby!" Lock shouted, cracking his knuckles and moving in before Beelzebub had a chance to notice that their girls were being taken away. "How about a hug fer yer auld pals, eh?"

"If you're going to show that rotten meat-mask you call a face in these parts," Luke added, moving in as well, "then you really shouldn't expect it to stay attached to your skull for long."

Beelzebub's smile didn't wane. He welcomed their attacks with open arms.

"We fell together once already, comrades," he called back to them. "This time, I'm afraid, you'll have to fall alone."

Lock and Luke shared a glance, then launched themselves at Beelzebub, wings unfurled. With their collective momentum, they knocked him back into the trees and out of sight.

On the altar behind me, Mal let out a grunt as he tried to rise and join them.

"No, Mal. Not you." I helped him into a sitting position, but I wouldn't help him rise up. "That's not your fight."

"Like hell it ain't." Mal struggled to stand without my assistance, but his body was still too stiff to be of much use to him in his current state. "Lemme lean on ya. Need to get my bearings, then—"

"Please, Mal. You need time to recover—and I need you here with me." I placed a hand on his shoulder as he tried to rise again and pushed him back down. "We have a plan. A plan that's going to work, I'm pretty sure."

"So far, so good, at least." Mom hurried around the edge of the altar, taking up a position in front of Mal and me. She cast a look back at Mal over her shoulder. "Welcome back, Malacoda. Glad to see you're alive and well again."

"You can thank me later," Belial added, ruffling Mal's hair. "And believe me—you'll want to. After tonight, I hope you know I'll be expecting yearly Mother's Day cards from here on out."

"Ma?" Mal scratched his head. "What the hell are you doing here?"

"Helping, of course," Belial chirped. "What else would I be doing?"

“It’s a long story,” I explained. I knew exactly how disorienting all of this must have been for him. Mere moments ago, Mal had been dead. Now, he was out of the coffin and straight into the fray.

“A story you’ll have to tell later, I’m afraid.” Mom turned her face to the skies. Overhead, two pairs of massive white wings were circling around us and preparing to descend. “The angels are here. Are you ready, Belial?”

“Oh, I’m never ready,” Belial admitted lazily—but she cracked her neck anyway and widened her stance like she was waiting for the perfect moment to pounce. “But it’s been a long time since Gabriel and I rolled around together. I suppose this is long overdue.”

As the two angels swooped down, Mom and Belial sprang into action. Mom threw herself at Michael, and Belial pounced on Gabriel. In a frantic spasm of skirts and arms and legs and wings, they wrestled like lions on the savanna—until finally, Michael and Gabriel took flight again, with Mom and Belial clinging to them, teeth and nails bared.

Whatever plan they thought they had for the angels, I hoped it was a good one. Belial was human now, and Mom, while formidable, was probably still susceptible to dying if Michael ended up dropping her.

If they wanted to see morning, they’d both have to hold on for dear life.

Only a moment later, Lock and Luke reemerged from the trees. They were disheveled and sweating—not to mention covered in black, demonic blood.

“Luke!” Evie cried out. “Are you—”

“I’m fine, love,” Luke said with a tired laugh. “Just knackered.”

“We’re angels again, remember?” Lock wrung the black ichor from the hem of his shirt. “We’ve got that shiny white angel blood. This is all Beelzebub’s. No ours.”

“Is he dead, then?” Joan asked.

“Aye,” Lock said.

Luke nodded and wiped the sweat from his brow with the back of his hand. “He’s dead.”

“Bea! Where’s Don?” I called out to her.

Bea glanced around quickly. When she didn’t see him anywhere, she closed her eyes instead.

“He’s nearby, I think,” she said. “I can feel him in the Abyss, getting closer to us. He should be here any minute now.”

Unfortunately, it looked like any minute now wasn’t going to be quite soon enough.

A slow clap echoed from the trees, coming from the same direction I’d seen Beelzebub’s swarm of flies take off in earlier. The sound grew louder as Leviathan emerged, dressed in a dark wool trench coat and Italian leather boots.

He was applauding us.

Just, he was doing it as sarcastically as possible—like he already thought this battle was over.

Like he thought he’d already won.

“Very good show, all of you,” he called out. “I’m sorry to have to cut it short—but really. Excellent performances all around.”

The Riders marched in behind Leviathan. They were all tall and broad enough to make even Lock look normal-sized. Each wore a helmet in their foretold color: white, red, black and green.

Conquest. War. Desire. Death.

Leviathan glanced around the clearing, then waved a hand lazily as he drew a silk pouch from his pocket.

“Take care of them,” he ordered. “Leave Ava and Malacoda for me.”

The Riders marched into action immediately. The First headed for Joan, Bea and Evie. The Second drew a sword and targeted Lock. The Third followed in the First’s footsteps initially, only to be intercepted by Don, who came flying through his portal to the Abyss like a bat out of Hell. The Fourth pulled off one of his leather gloves as he approached Luke.

I wanted to watch my friends in their fights—just in case they needed help so I could throw my hat into the ring as well.

But I had my own duel ahead of me still.

Leviathan. Fighting him wouldn’t be a matter of violence, though—it was a battle of waiting and wits instead.

“You.” Mal shoved himself to his feet, seething. He pointed a finger at Leviathan and shook it menacingly. “I’m gonna fuckin’ kill—”

“Mal, stop.” I pressed a hand to the scar on his chest. His wound was healed now, but the place where the dagger had struck him was still marred by twisted, shiny skin.

“Dammit, Ava!” Mal roared, shoving my hand away—but before he got it in his head to march forward, I rushed in front of him and blocked his way.

Mal was still recovering from being dead—and Leviathan was my father.

This was my problem. Not Mal’s.

I had a trap to spring.

“Trust me, Mal,” I muttered beneath my breath. “I’ve got this. You can have your pound of flesh from him when I’m done.”

I waited for Mal to argue with me, but for once, he only sighed tiredly.

“Hope you know what yer doin’, darlin’.” He moved to my side and took my hand.

Together, we watched my father stride toward the altar until he was only about ten feet away.

“Hey, Dad,” I said tonelessly. “Fancy seeing you here. Have you come for a hug?”

I needed him nine feet closer if this was going to work.

“Ava.” There was a twinkle in his eye as he spoke my name. He took another step forward. *Eight more feet.* “It’s *Dad* now, is it? You have no idea how long I’ve been waiting to hear you call me that.”

“Maybe you wouldn’t have had to wait so long if you would’ve stuck around long enough to raise me,” I pointed out. I needed him close—but that didn’t mean I had to pretend everything he’d done was all water under the bridge.

“Oh, your mother would have killed me if I’d stayed,” Leviathan scoffed. “That curse you Green witches carry is dangerous magic to be trifling with. Even for me.”

“Is that how you’ve stayed alive all this time? Keeping your distance?” I let him hear the curiosity in my voice. It was honest, after all. I was dying to know how he’d managed it.

“Of course not. I have magic in me too, Ava. Magic I passed onto you, as it turns out.” He smiled as he continued to approach like we shared a secret along with our powers now. “It warmed my heart to see that little outburst of yours at the market. You really are my daughter. That was proof.”

“Your powers—the ones I inherited from you—kept you alive, then?”

Two more steps forward. He was nearly there now.

“In a way,” he said. “When I realized that your mother had tricked me, I knew I had to act fast. So I left. I found other women to impregnate. I passed the effects of the curse onto my other children. One by one, they’ve been succumbing to the curse so I haven’t been in danger of it.” He brushed off the lapel of his jacket with the backs of his fingers. “Most of them are dead now. A shame, I suppose—but soon, I won’t need to worry about that anymore.”

“Ending the world won’t keep you safe from it,” I told him—but then again, I wasn’t entirely sure about that.

His smile broadened. “Actually, it will. When the Green line of witches comes to an end, the curse is broken. I’ll be free.”

“You want me to join you...so you can kill me?” I had to admit, that was a bold thing to tell me right now. “Not exactly a compelling reason to join you, Dad.”

“Oh, I’m not planning on killing you, Ava. Don’t catastrophize,” he scoffed. “It’s the other women in your family I have to worry about. Your sister Zara has three daughters already, doesn’t she? And you have a distant cousin on her sixth already. Seventh daughters of seventh daughters...you would think it would be a tall order to complete over the course of two generations, but you Greens are *prolific*. I can’t even be sure that I’ve tracked you all down.” He shrugged. “Who knows what distant relative of yours might be pregnant with a new Green witch as we speak? The mind simply boggles at the possibilities.”

He was one step away from where I needed him now. All I needed to do was keep him talking—and keep him coming this way.

“So you’re endin’ the Earth to save yer own skin,” Mal rasped at my side. “You always were a yella-bellied coward, Leviathan—but all of humanity just to keep your immortality? That’s a high price to pay.”

“The best things in life don’t come cheap,” Leviathan said. “The curse is tied to the blood of all Green women. I can’t be certain it will end until every last Green woman is dead.” He turned his smile back to me. “Except for you, Ava. I don’t need you dead to ensure you won’t have any more children after the one in your womb now. Without Mal, I doubt you’ll breed again. Which reminds me.” He turned back to Mal. “Didn’t I kill you earlier today?”

Mal rubbed the back of his head. “I might recall somethin’ of the like.”

“How annoying.” Leviathan sighed. “I suppose I’ll just have to do it again.”

“But if you keep me alive...my daughter will carry the curse too,” I pointed out. “I’m not about to join you if you’re planning on keeping me alive, just so you can kill my husband and my daughter.”

“That baby in your womb will be claimed by one of the Four Riders when she comes of age,” Leviathan explained, holding up his little silk pouch. The souls of the Riders must have been inside it. “And I control the Riders. I can ensure that she won’t have any children either. Only Mal has to die, really. It’s quite simple, when you think about it.”

“See, that’s the part of your offer that I’m really struggling with,” I told him. “I quite like my husband. I’d rather not see him dead if I can help it.”

“I understand, dear. But it’s time to face fate.” With a nod, Leviathan gestured to the fighting behind us. “This is a battle you were always destined to lose.”

I turned to see what he was talking about.

From the way things looked...he was right.

The First had Evie, Bea and Joan backed against the tree line. No matter what they threw at him, he deflected it like it was nothing.

The Second threw Lock to the ground hard. With a grunt and a snap, he brought his boot down viciously on Lock’s leg.

Don and the Third were latched together in a furious struggle—but the Third’s grip on Don’s arms was much stronger. There was pain on Don’s face as the Third’s fingers pierced first through the fabric of his sleeve, then deeply through his skin.

Luke was faring worst of all, though. The Fourth—a man he’d once considered a friend and ally—showed no recollection of any such thing now. As Luke raised his hand, holding a ball of crackling white light, the Fourth caught his wrist. With his free hand—now ungloved—The Fourth grabbed the side of Luke’s face and lifted Luke up by it.

Luke roared in agony. His skin sizzled and smoked beneath the Fourth’s palm like the mere touch of it burned.

“Your allies are falling, Ava.” Leviathan held out his hand, offering it to me. “Come with me now and perhaps I’ll spare them. Perhaps I’ll let them live, too.”

“I don’t trust your capacity for mercy.” It hurt to see how much the others were hurting—but I had Mal by my side, alive once more. Even better, we had a plan. We just needed to hold out—just for a little longer. *One more step.* “I won’t go with you. I may be your daughter, but I’m not yours.”

“I don’t *need* your consent, little girl,” Leviathan warned me, taking a final step forward. *Yes. Perfect!* “If you won’t come with me freely—I’ll simply take you instead. I’ll take you all—somewhere far away from Greenriver. Far away from everything and everyone you hold dear. And should you force me to do that, believe me, my child—none of you will ever come back.”

“Do it, then,” I challenged him. “I’m not joining you of my own free will. None of us are.” I held my arms out wide, showing him my palms. Would he notice the gash on my left one, I wondered? Even if he did—I had him exactly where I wanted him now. For him, it already far too late to back down. “If you’re so great and powerful—then come on. Capture me by force. It’s the only way you’re going to get what you want.”

In an instant, his face contorted into an expression that was entirely inhuman. It wasn’t even demonic—it was something far worse. His eyes bulged. His cheeks hollowed and his skin pulled taut, until I could see every tendon beneath it, the outline of every blackened vein. His teeth grew long and slender—fang-sharp as he bared them at me. It was like staring down a mouth full of needles made of old bone.

He lunged at me, hands outstretched. His nails were long and yellowed now, pointed and curled at the ends like claws.

I didn’t even flinch.

Neither did Mal.

Leviathan threw his full weight into his attack—but to no avail.

His feet were bound firmly to the earth beneath them. As he continued to struggle to free them, a pentagram shaped from red-hot embers appeared all around him.

Mal and I stood outside of the circle. Leviathan was trapped within it.

“What—what is this, Ava?” He snarled as he stared down at my mother’s binding circle, jerking his body forward with increasing frustration as he failed to move his feet. “What have you done?”

“Bound you to the earth,” I spat back at him. I held up my hand, where the slash from my mother’s knife was still tacky and red across my palm.

“You’re my father. Your blood runs through my veins. I used it to bait the trap—and now, it looks like you’re pretty well stuck.”

He stared at me for a moment with pure hatred in his eyes.

Good.

It was a compliment, really, to be hated by a man like him.

“Riders!” Leviathan roared—but his voice had a tremble in it that it hadn’t before. “To me!”

In an instant, the violence stopped. The Second removed his boot from Lock’s leg and the Third released Don’s arm. The Fourth lowered Luke back down to his feet and dropped his hand from Luke’s face. After a tense moment, Luke drew a massive, rasping breath.

Evie rushed to Luke. He stayed standing for just long enough to kiss her, then slowly collapsed to the ground on the edge of the glade. Bea and Joan raced to their husbands’ sides as well, while the Riders marched over to the place where Leviathan was bound.

But as they approached the smoldering circle that surrounded the pentagram, they didn’t cross it.

They couldn’t.

The same binding magic that kept Leviathan in was keeping them out.

“They can’t help you,” I told him. “Even if you order them to kill us all—there’s nothing to be gained. This circle will keep on burning, and you’ll be stuck here with no one to help you. No one to release you. You’ll spend the rest of eternity standing right here in this exact spot, watching the world move on while you can’t even lift your...”

A strong gust of wind swept through the glade, stoking the embers surrounding Leviathan to full flames. Overhead, I watched as the moon was eclipsed by a pair of large white wings.

“...feet,” I finished lamely. I was already distracted from our moment of triumph. Not just because of the wings—*angel’s wings*—but because of the man who was swooping in on them.

Or, more accurately, because of the woman that man held in his arms.

“Thank you, Michael.” Mom pressed a kiss to Michael’s cheek as he lowered her down to her feet nearby. “That would have been a long, annoying walk if I’d made it on my own. This was *much* more pleasurable.”

“Happy to oblige,” Michael murmured. He raised his hand to his cheek almost sentimentally, pressing his fingers against the place where my

mother had kissed him. “Will you, ah...be needing anything else from the forces of Heaven?”

“Oh, no. I think we’re good here.” Mom glanced between Leviathan and me, then gave me a wink before turning to Michael again. “But it’s so sweet of the forces of Heaven to offer. Especially when they come in such a handsome package.”

She patted Michael’s chest twice, and even though I was certain I must have been mistaken...for a moment, I thought I might have actually seen Michael smile.

“Well, ah...” Michael cleared his throat, then swallowed. He was looking pretty hot beneath the collar for an angel—and my mother was obviously the party to blame. “Good, then. Yes. It does seem that you have everything in order here...”

“Oh, we do.” Mom let her fingers trail down Michael’s chest as she stepped away from him. “Don’t you worry that gorgeous golden head of yours about that.”

“Ah... Right.” Michael licked his lips and stared at my mother for just a little too long to leave me comfortable, then looked to the skies once more. “In that case, I’ll go...explain the situation to the others, I suppose. They’ll be wondering.”

“Fly safe,” Mom purred at him—*purred*.

It was like the two of them hadn’t been fighting mere moments ago at all.

“Consorting with angels now, Morgana?” Leviathan straightened his lapels and pulled himself back to his full height in an arrogant huff. He looked human again now. Maybe he was putting on appearances for Mom’s benefit—not that he’d earn himself any sympathy for it. “I thought you were better than that.”

“Oh, Levi,” she cooed, moving to the edge of the circle. “You just don’t like the idea that I’m doing better than *you*.” Mom gave me a nod of approval as Leviathan continued to strain against the power of the binding circle. “Good work, Ava. He walked right into it, didn’t he?”

“Monologuing away,” I confirmed.

“I was *not*—”

“Pff. We both know better than that, sweetie. And before you think someone might come along to save you,” Mom added with a certain joy in her voice, “Remember—you’re in *my* neck of the woods now, sweetheart.

The angels have seen the light and surrendered. Your allies are dead. I saw your forces fall myself. Your war has been lost, and not many travelers come down this path. Any that do won't have the slightest idea of how to let you out of this little cage."

"*Bitch*," Leviathan spat at her. "You fucking—"

Mom laughed. "Now, now. That's no way to talk to the mother of your child."

"Or to the only woman who can set you free," I added. "So if I were you, I'd shut up and start thinking about what you have left to bargain with. By my count, it's not much at all."

In the aftermath of the fight, all around us, my friends were tending to their husbands with concern and care.

"Are you okay?" Evie lowered herself down next to Luke and cradled his head to her chest. "The Fourth—did he—"

"Oh, he got me good, love," Luke said with a dry, tired laugh. The dark mark of the Fourth's touch wasn't fading, but at least Luke was breathing again. "But I'm alive. Don't you worry about that."

"Don, your arm..." Bea peeled Don's shirt away from his skin, revealing a deep, bloody gash from where the Third had gripped his bicep.

"It's nothing," Don said, smiling down at her. "Doesn't even hurt. And it will hurt less once you've patched me up."

"You really let the Second do a number on your leg, big guy." Joan tutted at Lock as she helped him to his feet. "You gonna be able to walk?"

"Might have to lean on ye a wee bit." Lock hissed as he tried to put his weight on his injured leg, only to slump against Joan as it gave way. "Or... ach. Sorry, mo leannan. Maybe a lot."

"Ava." From within the pentagram, Leviathan reached out for me. His hand was shaking—from nerves, or from fear, it was hard to say. "Ava. My daughter. You have my blood in your veins. I gave you life with my seed. I'm your father, your—"

"Oh, stop it," I sneered at him, stepping away from him. Mal caught me in his arms and held me tight. "A father is someone who sticks around to raise his child." I looked up at Mal—Mal, who smiled down at me tiredly, obviously relieved that he'd be able to do just that for the baby still growing in my womb. When I turned my gaze back to Leviathan, it was full of ice. "You were a sperm donor. Nothing more."

"Besides," Mal added. "I think the lady asked ya to shut yer trap."

“We’ve still gotta figure out something to do with him,” Evie said from where she knelt on the grass, smoothing her fingertips over the dark scar that the Fourth had left on Luke’s cheek.

“Can hardly let him go free,” Luke mumbled, leaning into Evie’s touch. “Not now.”

“We kill him,” Lock growled, reaching for the bloody dirk on his belt. “I dinnae care who does it—but it ought to be done.”

“He’s caused too much pain for too many people,” Joan agreed. “And if we hadn’t succeeded just now...he would’ve done so, so much worse.”

I looked up to Mal, searching his face for his reaction to this idea.

“Is that it?” I asked. After all the blood that had been shed here tonight, I supposed one more death hardly mattered—but the battle was over. Leviathan was bound here until we released him. He couldn’t even put up a fight for his own life. “Is killing him...right?”

“No.” Stiffly, Mal shook his head. Little by little, the tan was finally beginning to return to his cheeks. “We don’t kill him. Any death for him now would an easy one—and he doesn’t deserve that.”

“What, then?” I asked. “From the sounds of things, he’s been living on borrowed time ever since him and Mom...”

“Fucked?” Mom supplied.

My lips twisted in distaste. “Yeah. Since...that.”

“We give him somethin’ worse than death.” Mal nodded at Leviathan’s chest. “We take his soul, and all his powers with it. We make him human. Leave him to live out the rest of his days as a simple, helpless man. Just like all the people he would’ve killed if he’d gotten his way.”

“Oh!” Mom’s eyes widened and brightened in an instant. A smile of fascination tugged at the corners of his lips. “I can see why Ava likes you so much, Malacoda. *That* is...mmm. A particularly delicious idea.”

Leviathan obviously didn’t agree. The panic in his gaze was joined by beads of sweat at his brow. As Mom approached him, his face went white-pale.

“Morgana,” Leviathan panted. “Please—”

“Oh, no, sweetheart. Don’t beg. It doesn’t suit you.” Mom laid a palm against his chest and stared up at him with a wistful fondness. “Not outside of the bedroom, at least.”

“Mom...ew.” I burrowed deeper into Mal’s embrace and resisted the urge to cover my ears with my hands.

I was still wrapping my head around the idea that Leviathan was my father.

The last thing I needed was to hear about the particulars of the night that I'd been conceived.

"Ah." Mom practically purred as she reached into Leviathan's chest and pulled out an ugly white chip, yellowing like a three-pack-a-day smoker's teeth. Its edges were ragged. It was stiff, but it looked almost paper-thin. "There we are. Look at that—you've nearly worn it clear through."

"I would have preferred it if you killed me." The light from Leviathan's eyes had gone out like a snuffed candle. His voice was hollow, toneless and dull as Mom pocketed his soul. "This is a fate worse than death."

"Well, you've certainly earned it, sweetie. Don't worry, though—you'll still die. Eventually."

"And you won't be able to use your powers to pass the curse onto your children anymore," I added. "Fancy that."

Mom placed a kiss on his cheek and Leviathan winced like her lips burned his skin. "Since you're a soulless, powerless human now—and under *my* control to boot—I suppose that means that you won't be needing *these* anymore, either."

Mom plucked the silk bag that contained the souls of the Four Riders from Leviathan's hands. He didn't fight her for them. He only looked forward with a thousand-mile stare as Mom tied the bag to her belt by its strings.

"At least they're in our possession now," said Don. "Though I'm not sure that Morgana is the best keeper of them."

"Nonsense," Mom scoffed. The chips rattled against her outer thigh as she patted them. "No treasure is safer than one protected by a witch."

"S'pose she ain't wrong." Mal pressed a kiss to my temple. "You've sure kept my heart safe all right. Ain't much of a treasure..."

"It is to me," I assured him. "It always will be."

"But that begs the question..." Bea gave the silk bag at Mom's hip a wary look. "Now that we have them, what do we do with them now?"

"Well, we cannae just put 'em back were we found 'em." Lock limped forward, leaning heavily on Joan. He came to a halt in front of the Second

and gave him a pointed, fearsome scowl. “I know what ye four wee bastards are about still, ye ken.”

I didn’t know about *wee*—the Riders were all easily six-seven or six-eight. They were all *certainly* taller than Lock.

But...Lock did have *one* point.

“That’s right,” Joan said, matching Lock’s scowl with one of her own. “When our daughters come of age, you’re all going to come and *claim* them. The prophecy says so.”

“Claim them...and start the apocalypse, too,” Evie said with a shudder. She looked up at Luke with worry in her eyes. “And we still can’t be sure that when it’s over, the world will be better for it.”

“True. Without direction...” Luke closed his eyes and pressed his uninjured cheek wearily against the crown of Evie’s head. “There’s no telling whether the Riders will leave the Earth better or worse in their wake.”

“Unless...” Mom weaved her way between the Riders, peering at them with keen interest as she passed through their ranks. “Unless there is. Maybe...maybe there’s another way.”

“Which is?” Mal asked. His eyes narrowed with suspicion. “I know exactly how *your* way usually works out for folks like us, Morgana.”

“Oh, Mal.” She waved Mal’s words away with a flick of her fingers. “Please, call me *Mom*. As for a solution to our problem...I’ll need to read the runes to be sure of it. And the Riders themselves, for that matter.” She squinted as she gazed up into her reflection in the Fourth’s shiny visor. “Their auras are...difficult to sift through right now. A swirling ocean of chaos—reds and whites and blacks and greens.”

“And when you’re done?” I asked. “What are we working with if you’re right?”

“If all goes well, I’ll have more than just a solution for our little problem.” She turned to me with a sly smile. “I’ll have the certainty that it will work as well. I’m sure none of you will like it—but then again, you never do.”

“What do you reckon, darlin’?” Mal asked me. “Can we trust this?”

I turned to him, pressing my hands against his chest. Beneath my palms, I could feel his heartbeat. Steady and strong.

“If she says she has a solution, she means it,” I told him. “And if she says we won’t like it, it’s probably not a lie. No stone left unturned, right?”

“No stone left unturned,” Mal grumbled in agreement. “Let’s just hope it ain’t a gravestone this time.”

“Come along then, you. You can decide what you’ll do with your newfound humanity while you make me a cup of tea.” Mom dissolved the circle that bound Leviathan, then looked to the Riders. “You four can come with me as well. I need to have a better look at you—and in the meantime, you can help with breakfast.”

On the horizon, the sun was beginning to make an appearance. The first fingers of dawn were stretching out across the darkened sky, promising a new day for us all.

Whether it would be a bright one, or if there was another storm rolling in just over the trees...

For that, we’d still have to wait and see.

AVA

We all settled beneath the cherry tree out in Mom's front yard to tend to our wounds and hear her out. Bea was binding the wound on Don's arm with one hand while Abbie pulled up grass and tossed it in the air, and Joan had put a splint together for Lock's leg. Evie and Luke were huddled close together with a sleeping Lily between them. It didn't seem like there was anything to be done about Luke's face—but even though he was scarred after his encounter with the Riders, Evie still stared up at him like he was the handsomest man she'd ever laid eyes on.

As for Mal, he kept his arm around me.

I wasn't sure that he was going to let me away from his side ever again.

Mom emerged from her cottage with the Four Riders in tow. Leviathan's little silk bag—the one that contained the Riders' souls—jingled at the belt around her waist.

The Riders seemed to be at her beck and call now. Whether they wanted to be or not—with the way their helmets covered their faces, it was impossible to say.

"Sorry for the wait. I had to put Leviathan to bed—and then, we needed to finish breakfast," Mom explained. She nodded to the door of the cottage. It opened and my sisters came out of it, one by one, led by Zara's bright-eyed triplets. They were all barefoot and still in their pajamas—but that had never stopped the triplets from wanting to play. "The girls wanted

pancakes. Say what you want about these Riders of yours, but they're *excellent* kitchen help."

"Great," Mal grumbled in my ear. "When they're done ending the world, they can serve up chicken and waffles to whoever's left alive."

"I've spoken to the angels as well, you should be happy to know," Mom continued, oblivious to Mal's little quip. "They were a little testy at first, but I think I got to them in the end. That Michael is *quite* the looker." Mom looked to Luke. "Do you know if he's single?"

"He is," Luke admitted. "But if you're looking to change that, let's hope he values his life enough to stay that way."

"Hmm. Maybe so," Mom muttered. "I've never killed an angel before. But never mind that for now." She gave us all a radiant smile. She looked positively pleased with herself. "I've communicated my plan to them and they're happy with it. Now, the only question left is whether you're all willing to agree to it as well."

"We'd need to hear it first," Lock said, pointing out the obvious. "I dinnae think I trust any plan of yers without gettin' all the particulars laid out, ye ken."

Mom pouted at him. "Oh, ye of little faith."

"He's serious, Morgana," Don said. "We all are."

"Very well. Your prophecy says that when these four children come of age..." She gestured to Lily and Abbie. To Joan's pregnant belly...and to mine. "The Four Riders will come to claim them and the end of the world will begin. Correct?"

She gave a curt nod to the Four Riders. Conquest. War. Desire. Death. The Apocalypse in leather jackets, motorcycle helmets, and blue jeans.

The world wouldn't end with a bang, or with a whimper—it would end in a cloud of exhaust fumes spat out by souped up Harley Davidsons. *Great.*

"Correct," said Luke. He glanced to Lock. "That's what Leviathan told you, isn't it?"

"Aye," Lock confirmed, glaring at the Riders. He limped over to the one in the red helmet, poking him firmly in the chest. "And I'm here to tell you lot ye won't be *claimin'* anything of the sort. No daughter of mine is gonna be *taken* by some fuckin' *motorcyclist*—ye all might as well get that through yer thick helmets here and now."

Behind him, Joan cracked her knuckles for punctuation. She still seemed annoyed that Lock hadn't allowed her to participate in the battle. There was a sinister glint in her black eyes—the kind that made her look like the most intimidating pregnant woman I'd ever seen.

"You can't stop fate, Moloch," Mom reminded him. She rolled her eyes and removed his finger from the Rider's chest. "You silly men—you never learn, do you?"

"Then why dontcha get on with it and tell us how you reckon yer gonna fix this," Mal grumbled. His arm tightened around me as he placed a protective hand over my belly. "I don't much fancy the idea of my kid bein' hauled off by a bunch of bikers myself."

"I don't want the world to end, either." I glanced back toward Mom's house, where my sisters had changed out of their matching cloaks to play tag with Zara's triplets. They were all smiling and laughing. Happy. Whole. *Alive*. "There's too much that's still worth fighting for. If it's all going to be destroyed anyway..."

Bea grimaced as she finished binding up the wound on Don's arm. "Then everything we've been doing was all for nothing."

"Which would just be...stupid," Evie agreed. She buried her nose in Lily's hair and shook her head. "I'm not willing to accept that. At all."

"The solution is simple, really," Mom said, sweeping back toward us with a swish of her skirts. "My prophecy says that my grandchild will save the world. If you combine the two..." She clicked her tongue at us. "Frankly, I'm surprised that the rest of you haven't already figured it out."

"Spell it out for us folks in the dunce caps, then," Mal said through his teeth. I knew that his patience with my mother had been thin from the start—but now that she was gloating, she was burning through it faster than ever. "When you add it all up, what are we lookin' at?"

"The girls are innocents. They'll be raised to be generous and clever and kind—to be good. That was your plan all along, wasn't it? Raise them well and hope for the best?"

"It was," said Luke. "But the Riders—"

"The Riders are more...fluid, aren't they? You used to consider that one your ally—you said so yourself." Mom nodded to the Rider in the green helmet, who gave a stiff nod.

"That's the Fourth," Evie said. "He used to help out Luke when we were in Vegas. Before..." She frowned and brushed her fingers over the

place on Luke's cheek that was still scarred black from the Fourth's touch.

"Before Leviathan took control of them," Luke finished for her. He gave the Fourth a tired smile and a nod, which the Fourth returned silently. "No hard feelings, old friend. I know your soul was just in bad hands."

"Which is why we're going to put it into better ones." Mom crouched down in front of Bea and gave Abbie's cheek a little pinch. Her voice shifted into the sing-song tone of baby talk. "You wouldn't let them end the world, would you, shnookums?"

With his good arm, Don took hold of my mother's wrist and pulled her hand away from Abbie's face.

"With all due respect, Morgana—and if you're suggesting what I think you are, believe me, that's very little respect at all—we don't want the Four Riders coming to claim our of-age daughters," Don said with a strained voice. "I like the idea of giving them our *children* even less."

My mouth gaped open. Giving our children—two of whom weren't even *born* yet—to the Riders *now*...

What would possibly be gained from that?

"I think you oughta choose yer next words carefully, Ma," Mal growled.

Normally, I would've been touched that he'd just called my mother *ma*—but circumstances in consideration, the only emotion I was being touched by now was dread.

"Mom...you don't mean—"

"Oh, no. I do. Just—it's not so bad as you're assuming." Mom's eyelashes fluttered as she suppressed another eye roll. "The Four Riders will need masters if we're intending to control this apocalypse. Or, mistresses, as fate would have it."

"*Mistresses*? No bairn of mine is about to be some fuckin' *mistress* to nobody, ye lavvy-headed—" Lock trudged toward Mom, fists clenched and fuming. If it hadn't been for his injured leg, I doubted that Joan would have been able to throw herself in front of him in time to stop him before he strangled my mother before my very eyes.

"Lock," Joan warned him. She placed her hands on his chest and gave him a stern look. "I don't think that's what Morgana is implying." Joan shot my mother a stern look. "Is it?"

"Not...immediately, anyway," Mom admitted.

"Dammit, Joanie! Let me at her!" Lock snarled, lunging forward again.

“Oh, stop it, you busted old bagpipe,” Mom sneered at him. “This isn’t *my* design—it’s the only rational way to safely fulfill *your* ancient prophecy. The Riders will claim the girls eventually in one way or another. There’s no way around that.”

“You can’t stop fate,” I whispered. “But...Mom, when you say *claim*... what exactly does that mean?”

“That facet of the prophecy has yet to be determined,” she said. “But you all saw what damage the Riders did today when their souls were in the wrong hands. Unless we do something now, we’ll have no idea whether it means marry...or kill.”

Luke reached up to touch the damaged skin on his cheek. Don gripped his injured arm, and Lock bent down to rub his wounded leg.

Behind me, Mal removed his hand from my belly to run his fingers across the thin cut across his neck—the one that had nearly killed him all over again.

Mom was right in one regard, at least—the Riders were powerful things when they were being used for evil. If we wanted to save the world, we needed to make sure their souls were in good hands...

But was giving them our children really the only way to ensure that?

“What are you proposing we do, then?” I asked.

I hoped for the best...and prepared myself for the worst.

“We bind them together, of course,” Mom said—like that was so simple. “The souls of the Riders and the souls of the children. We make them into...well. Soulmates, for lack of a better term.”

“Soulmates,” Mal spat. “I see how it is. You could settle for just forcin’ your own daughter into marriage—so now ya’ve gotta go fixin’ up other people’s as well?”

“You seem to be very happy with how the marriage you were *forced* into has ended up, Mal,” Mom pointed out.

“No thanks to you,” Mal shot back at her. “Pretty sure I died for the pleasure.”

“You did,” she admitted. “But I don’t need a sixth sense to see that you obviously think it was worth it.”

To her credit, that did seem to shut Mal up.

“Soulmates won’t stop the apocalypse, Morgana,” Luke said. “Even if we did let you bind the Riders to our children—”

“Oh, Lucifer. It’s unbecoming for the devil to play dumb,” said Mom. “Or have you already forgotten your Greek?”

“Apocalypse,” Evie said. “From *apokalupsis*—to reveal. We’re not playing dumb, Morgana. Luke’s just pointing out the fact that your plan is likely no different from Leviathan’s.”

Leviathan. The mention of his name made the chip that contained my father’s soul feel heavier in my pocket. The sound made me wince.

“That’s why he wanted to take Lily and Abbie—and Ava and Joan, too,” Bea added, frowning.

“And why he took the Riders’ souls to begin with.” Joan shook her head. “He wanted to bind them all—same as you.”

They were right and I knew it. Leviathan—I couldn’t quite bring myself to call him *dad*—had told me as much himself.

All of my sisters’ fathers were evil men. Dead men, too.

But now that I knew who mine truly was, I knew he was more evil than all of them.

Thanks to Mal, he’d finally met a fate he considered even worse than death.

But while my father might have been a grade-A bastard, I had to admit that my mother wasn’t...*quite* as bad as everyone was making her out to be.

“Leviathan didn’t just want to bind our kids to the Riders,” I explained. “He wanted to hurt them. Raise them to be hateful and selfish and cruel. He wanted to teach them to hate the world they’d been born into so that when they finally did come of age, they’d use the Riders to end it. He told me so.”

“Why the fuck would he do that?” Joan asked, reeling back with confusion.

“He’s my father.” I tried to hold her gaze, but the look of shock on her face made that hard. “My real one. He...offered to let me help.”

I turned away from the others before I had to see how they reacted. Pity, maybe. Anger and disgust seemed just as likely, though.

Leviathan was the man who’d tried to make all of their lives hell for so many years—and not the Hell that could be found in Luke’s Inferno on the Vegas Strip, either.

He’d leaked the wrong prophecy to the angels, resulting in Evie being murdered by them over and over again. He’d tried to force Bea into a

marriage with his son—my half-brother, or so it seemed now. He'd cheated Joan out of her soul before Lock had won it back, and taken the souls of all of the Riders, too.

He'd even brought about the curse that had plagued my mother's bloodline for centuries. The one that had left Mal dead.

If they thought my mother was bad, now that they all knew who my father was, they must have thought I was even worse.

The silence that followed said it all—at least, until Joan broke it with a snort of a laugh.

"Ava, why are you acting like that matters?" she asked.

"Because I'm evil." Duh. I couldn't believe she was making me explain it. "He passed it onto me. He said he saw it in me himself. That's *why* he offered to let me...to let me help *hurt innocent children* with him, Joan."

"Oh, Jesus, Aves," Bea groaned. "Look, I was almost *married* to one of Leviathan's kids. Simon wasn't evil—just kind of entitled and dumb. And look at *my* parents, for fuck's sake. They never cared about me—they just wanted an heir."

"I never knew my parents," Joan reminded me. "They could be evil too, for all I know."

"Luke and Lock don't even *have* parents," Evie added. "I mean, they ended up falling from grace there for a while...but I think they're doing all right now."

"I told ya, darlin'. Evil ain't hereditary." Mal squeezed me tight as his voice rumbled in my ear. "Lily's the daughter of the devil himself—and Don can be a real dickhead, lemme tell ya—"

"Careful," Don warned.

"Eh. It's true." Mal pressed a kiss to my cheek. "But Lily's sweet as pie, and little Abbie hasn't exactly been cursin' folks in Latin or climbing up on the ceiling to spit pea soup all over."

"Not while on the ceiling, at least," Bea said with a little laugh.

"You ain't evil, Ava," Mal assured me. "Trust me. I used to torture all kinds of evil folks down below. I think if you were rotten, I'd know."

"But Leviathan said—"

"Leviathan *lied*, darlin'," Mal insisted. "It's all that fucker ever did."

"That's true," Mom agreed. "You know, when I first met him, he told me he had a ten-inch—"

“Mom!” I shook my head rapidly in horror. “This is *not* the time.”

“Ah, well. Anyway.” She held up her hands in surrender. “That which is yet to be revealed on Earth—our little apocalypse—will be determined by the hearts of these children of yours. If you raise them to be good, the world will become better for it, too.” Mom clapped her hands together. “So, now that we’ve all come to an agreement on the nature versus nurture debate...”

Mom looked to the Four Riders—the four massive, silent harbingers of the apocalypse that she wanted to bind forever to the lives of four innocent children.

“Do you all find this agreeable?” she asked.

One by one, they nodded. A white helmet, then a red. A black. A green. They were in.

“Good.” My mother clapped her hands together, then turned to the rest of us. “And what about all of you?”

We all glanced around amongst ourselves. There was worry embedded in every expression—even Don’s. Even Lock’s. Even Luke’s—the face of the Devil himself.

Even Mal’s.

Especially Mal’s.

I knew exactly how he felt.

My mother was asking us to take the life of a child that was still nine months away from being born—her own grandchild, no less. Asking us to bind it to one of the deadliest entities in all of creation.

Could we really sacrifice our baby like this? The life of an innocent, just to save the world?

For a dark, grim moment, I thought about telling Mom no.

If it had been my life, I wouldn’t have hesitated. Self-sacrifice was something I could come to terms with.

It was what I’d thought I’d been doing when I married Mal.

But everything was different now.

Nothing was as it had originally appeared at all.

But that thought—if it *had been* my life—sparked a notion inside me. One that might just work.

“Can you take me instead?” I was the first to speak. I gave Mal’s hand a squeeze, then released it as I stepped forward. “Instead of our baby. Bind me in its place.”

“Darlin’, ya can’t just...” Mal whispered—but before he could talk me out of it, Joan stepped forward as well.

“And me,” she said, taking my hand in hers. “After Ava and I give birth, we can do it. Together.”

“Not without me you can’t,” Bea said. She passed Abbie off to Don and rushed forward as well, grabbing Joan’s hand. “I don’t want my daughter to have any part of this—but I’m more than willing. Count me in, too.”

“And me,” Evie said. She stepped up on the other side of me, squeezed my hand and gave me a nod. “Leave the kids out of it. There’s no reason that you can’t bind the souls of the Four Riders to us instead.”

I studied Mom’s face in the silence that followed.

“Is there?” I asked.

Already, my heart was sinking.

Her smile said it all: *that’s cute, girls, but that’s not how this works.*

“Unfortunately, your souls are already spoken for,” Mom explained with a shake of her head. She nodded to Mal, Don, Lock and Luke behind us. “Very much so, if I’m not mistaken.”

“Oh.” I turned to Mal, who gave me a shrug.

“I tried to tell ya, darlin’.” He shifted behind me and wrapped his arms around my waist. “Yer already mine.”

I let go of Joan’s and Evie’s hands so I could turn to face him. His blue eyes were full of a cocktail of emotions—none of them good. Sadness. Shame. A wistfulness for what could have been if somehow, the universe had been more kind.

“There’s no other way, is there?” I curled my fingers against his chest, willing even just a glimmer of hope for some other option...

But Mal wouldn’t have been looking at me like that if there had been one.

“It’s gotta be the girls, darlin’.” He moved a hand to my belly and smoothed his thumb up and down. “I don’t like it either. You know I wouldn’t even be considerin’ this if there was somethin’ else that could be done.”

“I know.” I leaned into him, resting my forehead against his collarbones. “I just...I hate it.”

“I do too,” Joan grumbled, moving behind me and wrapping her arms around me as well. “It’s bullshit.”

“Entirely,” Bea agreed, joining us.

“The worst bullshit I’ve ever heard.” Evie moved in as well, completing the hug pile—or so I assumed.

Mal looked uncomfortable enough to be included as-is—and a quick glance at Don, Luke and Lock told me that unless someone started putting guns to their heads, they wouldn’t be joining in anytime soon.

“Okay.” My shoulders slumped from within the warm embrace of our group hug. “We’re doing this, then.”

“Okay,” said Joan.

“Okay,” echoed Evie and Bea.

I nodded, then closed my eyes tight.

I focused on the tightness in the pit of my belly—the place where my baby was still growing. It was so small still. So new and so delicate. So important to me.

So important to the world, too.

I’m sorry, little bean, I told it. You deserve better. You deserve a normal life—an easier one. That’s what I wanted for you. Not this. Never this.

In my mind’s eye, the baby was only a tiny seed, freshly planted. Its roots were in my womb, but my love for it was already flowering lushly in my heart.

As I spoke to it, a warmth radiated through my abdomen.

In the darkness, I saw it—imagined it?—glowing gold.

It was the same golden light that had ensconced Mal when my kiss had brought him back. Like sunshine after a long, hard storm. Balmy and bright.

The glow of the Almighty’s love. That’s what Luke had called it, anyway.

I opened my eyes and raised them to the sky above us.

If this was what he wanted, then dammit—it was going to be on *my* terms.

All right, Mr. God. I shifted my thoughts to the heavens, addressing this so-called Almighty. It wasn’t a prayer, exactly.

Prayers were supposed to be humble. Holy.

What I was thinking now...it was more of a threat.

You’ve been fucking with us for a long time, you know, I told Him. *So I bet you’re feeling pretty smug right now.*

There was no answer, of course. Only the wind through the trees overhead, rustling around in the leaves like a wordless whisper.

I'll give you this fate you've stirred up, I continued, undiscouraged. *But if you harm one single hair on this little baby's head—on any of their heads—you're gonna have one pissed-off mama on your hands.*

I frowned in confusion as I heard another voice in my head. Not the big, booming voice that I imagined the Almighty would have spoken with, though.

Actually, it wasn't a man's voice at all.

Four, actually. Joan's voice bounced around inside my skull, joining me in the talking-to I was currently in the process of silently delivering to the above. *I'm already pissed, actually, so whatever happens next—it had better go well. Or else.*

I looked to Joan, whose brow was set in a scowl. Her eyes were on the skies as well.

Uh, Joan... I sent my thoughts over to her tentatively. *What're you doing in my head?*

Making threats, she responded. Her lips still hadn't moved. *Same as you, I guess.*

Right... As if this situation had required additional weirdness. Next thing I knew, Geryon was going to start hollering from the stables, demanding sugar cubes and oats. *But, uh...how?*

Dunno, Joan responded. *Do you feel a gold light in your belly, too?*

I do, yeah. My frown faded. *Maybe it's...the babies? Are they connected somehow, do you think?*

They've all been wrapped up in this prophecy for thousands of years before we were even born, Joan mused. She glanced down at me, then shrugged. *Could be, I guess.*

I laughed out loud. *Anything's possible at this point, isn't it?*

"Aves...Joan..." Bea looked between us. She seemed even more confused than we were. "What're you two doing? Wanna clue us in?"

"Telling the Almighty that we're gonna kick His ass if He doesn't make sure our kids are okay through all of this," Joan explained.

"Is that all?" Evie asked. "Because it kinda looked like...the two of you were talking to each other telepathically or something."

"Oh, yeah," I admitted. "We were."

Evie and Bea exchanged a glance.

Bea raised her eyebrows.

Evie shrugged.

“Stranger things have happened,” Bea said after a beat. “Tell the Almighty I’ll join in the ass whoopin’ too, though. Since you’re already on the line with the big guy. The last time *I* talked to Him, I was just telling him not to watch me while I peed.”

“Oh. Ew. Can He...can He even do that?” Evie looked to Luke, who laughed and shook his head.

“I mean, I s’pose He can, love,” Luke said. “But current events in consideration...you’d think He has more pressing matters to attend to.”

“Remind him anyway,” Evie requested, turning back to Joan and me. “Four cosmic ass-kickings, and no watching *anyone* while they’re in the bathroom. After everything we’ve been through...that seems fair.”

“Got it.” I looked up to the skies again, searching the clouds for some sign of divine life. *Did you catch all that, Mr. God?*

Against the crown of my head, I could feel Mal chuckling into my hair. As far as talks with the Almighty went, this one must have been one of the more ridiculous ones. I didn’t blame him for laughing.

But as the clouds parted, they revealed shifting rays of golden sunshine behind them. They fell down upon our little group, bathing us in light and warmth.

I was going to take that as a yes.

MAL***NINE MONTHS LATER...***

It was a moment I never thought I'd live to see.
In a way, I supposed I hadn't.

I'd died once already just to bring the baby girl cradled in Ava's arms into existence. Ava'd gone through thirty-seven agonizing hours of labor to bring her into the world.

As I sat on the edge of our bed with my arm around my exhausted wife—as she held our red-faced newborn in her arms—I still had to wonder if this was really the right choice.

"You're glowering, Mal," Ava mumbled.

"Am not," I grumbled back to her.

"Yes, you are. I can see it."

"Your eyes are closed, darlin'. You can't see *shit*." I whispered the words in her ear then moved to kiss both of her eyelids. "And I ain't glowerin'. Yer just dreamin' it."

"I can *feel* it, Mal." Ava cracked an eye open, then snorted. "And now I *can* see it. What's wrong?"

"Yer mother's just gone to fetch the others. And Michael." My so-called *glower* intensified. Despite our warnings, Michael and Morgana had

been thick as thieves ever since we'd agreed to this horseshit plan. Maybe the idiot angel really did have a death wish. "And the Four."

"Good." Ava closed her eyes again and nodded sleepily. "Then pretty soon, it'll all be done."

"That's what I'm a-*glowerin'* about," I explained. "After everything we'd been through...are we really going to binding the soul of our baby to War, or *Desire*—or *Death*?"

I stroked a hand down Ava's face. The sweat was still slick on her brow, for fuck's sake. She'd given birth here in this bed only a few hours ago, attended to by her mother and sisters.

"That was what we all agreed to, wasn't it?" Ava asked.

"It was...but that was before you spent the better part of two days in labor." I moved the blanket away from our daughter's face so I could get a better look at her. She was wrinkled and red as a dried cranberry, without a lick of hair on her head. She was perfect. "That was before I met this little one, too."

"Little Rose," Ava whispered down at her, stroking our baby's chubby cheek. "Rosie Red."

"We really goin' through with this?" I took Ava's face in my hands so she could see the seriousness in my eyes. "Because if you're havin' second thoughts—we can get outta here. I'll call Don and barricade us in here—" I nodded to the door to our bedroom. Ava's vanity looked heavy enough that if I slid it in front, it'd hold for a while— "Then you, me and Rosie can slip through the Abyss, hole up in Vermont like everyone else was doin' before all this started. Your mother and the Riders will be none the wiser. We could even—"

"Mal." Ava looked up at me with sympathy in her eyes, then shook her head. "We agreed to this for a reason. Stop worrying. It's all going to be okay. Mom wouldn't put Rosie through this otherwise."

"Yeah, well, bet she told ya it was *all gonna be okay* before ya married me, too," I pointed out.

"And it was, wasn't it?" she teased.

"Thirty-seven hours of labor, Ava!"

"Yes," she said with a laugh. "That's true. But every one of them was worth it. I would've done thirty-seven more just to meet this little girl of ours."

I watched her continue to fuss over Rosie. The love in her eyes was plain as day.

It was a perfect match for all the love I felt in my heart—love I held for them both.

“I don’t like it,” I said. “Not one bit.”

“It’ll be easier when she’s older,” Ava assured me—but I didn’t know that I agreed about that.

I tried to imagine Rosie eighteen years older—and a little less bald. I could see her clearly in my mind’s eye. My dark blue eyes. Ava’s pretty red hair. It didn’t work, though. Not the way I needed it to. Wouldn’t have mattered if our Rose was forty and coming to tell us she was marrying the love of her life, the Almighty Himself—I wasn’t ever going to be ready to hand her over to some other man. Angel, demon, rider of the apocalypse—or otherwise.

She could be a hundred and ten with as many teeth in her mouth and hairs on her head as she had right now.

She’d still be our baby girl.

The others arrived in their little groups of three. Lily was taller every time I saw her now. That white-blond streak in her dark hair was certainly striking. It looked even better on her than it did on her dad. Abbie toddled in on her own two feet. She’d started walking about four months ago, though she still liked to hold Bea’s and Don’s hands. Hazel, Joan and Lock’s little girl, looked just about as angry to be here as her parents did. She’d inherited both of their grumpy looks—which told me she had a good head on her shoulders. I’d never seen an infant look so pissed off before.

Maybe she knew what we were about to do to her. At least, that was what I thought—until she let out a demon of a burp against Joan’s shoulder. Her glare turned to a giggling smile after. Apparently it hadn’t been a bad omen—just gas.

Finally, our last guests entered. Morgana came in on Michael’s arm, with the Four Riders trudging in right behind.

“Oh, good. We’re all here! Are we ready?” Morgana asked, looking around with a smile.

Aside from Hazel, she didn’t find another smile in the entire room.

We were doing this, apparently—but as far as *ready* went, I was pretty sure none of us would ever be.

“Ready for what?” Lily demanded. “I want a tea party. Are we doing a tea party?”

“No, hon.” Evie dropped down to speak to Lily on her level. “It’s like I told you on the way here, remember? Auntie Morgana is going to give you a very special item. Someday, you’re going to use it to make everything better.”

“Even fish sticks?” Lily asked. “Because I am so done with those.”

Abbie twisted her face in disgust at the mere mention of the word. “Gwoss.”

“Maybe not fish sticks,” Luke said. He lowered himself to the floor as well. After thousands of years of refusing to kowtow to Heaven’s whims, who would have thought all it took was a bossy little girl to bring the Devil to his knees? “But after we’re done here, I’ll take you to Birmingham and we get you some *proper* fish and chips. You’ll like those more. Promise.”

“Good.” Lily nodded, pleased with this suggestion. “Let’s hurry up, then. I’m *starving*.”

Luke and Evie exchanged a look.

“Sweetie...” Evie took one of Lily’s hands and gave it a squeeze. “If you take what Auntie Morgana gives you, we need you to understand that it’s going to be a lot of responsibility.”

“More than what any little girl should have to shoulder,” Luke added.

“Like a president,” Lily nodded sagely. “I remember. I know.”

“Kind of like...a president. I guess. Sure.” Evie winced. At least I wasn’t the only one who wasn’t sure about all of this still. “But we need you to know that you don’t *have* to go through with this.”

“If you don’t want it, we can still go to Birmingham,” Luke told her. “And we can still get fish and chips. But if even just a little part of you doesn’t want to do this—”

“Daddy,” Lily said firmly. Her eyes were full of keen knowing—something that felt so beyond her years. “I know. I *know*. I see things. I know.”

She pulled her hand away from Evie’s and marched right up to Morgana.

“So what’s the thing?” Lily asked. She held her hands out—*gimme, gimme*. “Is it cool?”

“It’s very powerful,” Morgana warned her. “And...yes. A little cool, I suppose.”

Morgana took the silk bag of poker chips from her belt and opened it, then dumped them out into Lily’s outstretched hands.

“Whoa.” Lily’s eyes went wide as she stared down at the four white chips that contained the Four Riders’ souls. “This is them?”

“Only one of them is yours. There’s one for each of you, see?” Morgana spread the chips out across Lily’s palms in a line. “One for you. One for Abbie. One for Hazel...” Morgana cast a glance to the baby in Evie’s arms and smiled with a rare touch of warmth. “And one for baby Rose.”

“Huh.” Lily scrunched up her face and closed her eyes. “They’re talking.”

“Are they?” Morgana’s eyebrows eased upwards. Apparently, not even she had been expecting that.

“Yeah,” Lily said with confidence. She opened her eyes again. “You didn’t say they were gonna *talk*.”

“I...didn’t think they could,” Morgana admitted. “What are they saying?”

Lily shrugged, then closed her hands around the chips. “Just stuff. And things. You know.”

“What kind of things, baby?” Evie asked.

“Secrets.” Slowly, Lily’s lips curled into a mischievous grin. “They know where they want to go.”

“That’s...peculiar.” Michael glanced at Morgana. “Are they supposed to do that?”

“How should I know?” Morgana asked. “If the girl says they’re speaking to her, though...they must be.”

We all watched as Lily walked over to the Riders. I could feel the tension in the room—we were all holding our breaths.

“You’re the Fourth.” Lily came to a stop in front of the Rider with the green helmet. “Here. This one is yours.”

She shuffled the chips around in her hands until she had the Fourth’s pinched between her fingers. She held it up to him.

After a moment of hesitation, he took it.

“Good. Now.” Lily tapped the center of her chest, just below her collarbones. “Put it here. That’s where it says it needs to be.”

The Fourth stared down at Lily, unmoving. Then, he looked to Luke.

To Luke's credit, he only grimaced a little before he nodded.

"She seems to know what she's doing," he said. "Almighty only knows why—but go on. It's all right."

The Fourth returned Luke's nod, then placed the white poker chip where Lily had told him to. It passed through the fabric of her shirt just below the collar, disappearing as it went in.

Just like that, it was done.

Lily smiled up at the Fourth, flashing the gaps in her teeth at him with a big grin.

"It feels warm in my heart," she told him. "Like hot cocoa. Or good hugs."

The Fourth looked a little shaky after it was over—like he could use a mug of hot cocoa himself—though, with his helmet on, it was impossible to really tell. Tentatively, he placed a gloved hand on top of Lily's head and ruffled her hair, then backed away.

"Now," Luke said to him, rising. He stood behind Lily and stared at the Fourth's visor with a dangerous glint in his eyes. "I expect you to look out for my daughter. From afar, if you can help it. But should she come to harm in any way..."

The Fourth held up a hand to stop Luke before he could proceed to making any threats. Then, slowly, he removed his helmet, revealing a piercing blue gaze and tousled black hair.

He wasn't nearly as ugly as I imagined he'd be.

In fact, he wasn't ugly at all. Death, to my surprise, was a pretty good-looking guy.

Not much of a talker still—but I supposed Lily would probably talk enough for the both of them.

"He'll take care of her," Evie assured Luke. She rose as well and moved around Lily to give the Fourth a hug. "She'll be most protected girl in the entire world—they all will be."

The Fourth swallowed, then nodded.

He looked pretty stunned.

"And tea parties," Lily said over her shoulder to him. Already, she was moving on to the next chip. "*Lots* of tea parties."

Again, the Fourth nodded.

Maybe I was imagining it, but for a second there, I could've sworn I almost saw him smile.

"You're the Third," Lily said as she stood in front of the black-helmeted Rider. "Here. This one belongs to Abbie now."

The Third turned his head to Abbie, who stared up at him with wide gray eyes.

"Oh, like Hell it does." Don stepped in front of Abbie, shaking his head and scowling. "I know exactly what you're about, pal. It's not happening."

I understood Don's reticence. The Third was Desire.

I didn't reckon I would've been too pleased about that concept myself.

But before Don could protest any more, Abbie broke away from Bea and toddled around Don's legs, hands outstretched.

"Up," Abbie said, reaching for the Third. "Up!"

He stared down at her for a moment, then lifted her up into his arms.

"She won't want for anything, at least," Bea said, placing a hand on Don's shoulder as he began to grind his teeth. "It's innocent, Don. He'll be like a big, brooding bodyguard who spoils her with presents. She'll be thrilled."

"Innocent for now," Don growled. "What happens when she turns eighteen, though?"

"Then she'll be getting old enough to start make her own decisions," Bea said. "We'll raise her to make good ones."

"It won't be at eighteen, anyway," Morgana scoffed. "When was the last time you spoke with an eighteen-year-old? They're children still. She won't be of age until she's at least twenty-one."

"Great. Old enough to drink enough wine that she forgets what good decisions look like," Don said through his teeth. "Perfect. Love it. *Great.*"

"That's a long time from now, darling," Bea reassured him. "I was twenty-one, drinking wine and making bad decisions once myself."

"Yes," Don said thinly. "That's exactly what I'm worried about."

"Good. Then you can be sure to beat the handsome out of him if he gives your worries any purchase," Bea said, inclining her head toward the Third. "Look."

The Third had taken off his helmet as well. He had messy, sandy hair and surprisingly trustworthy brown eyes. Like the Fourth, he was a looker, all right.

But there was a seriousness in his gaze that suggested he knew exactly what a significant thing he held in his arms.

Abbie giggled as he placed his chip against her chest—then smacked him playfully across the face, her giggles turning to a roar of laughter.

Don snorted. The Third blinked, stunned.

“Well...at least she’s not afraid to defend herself.” Some of Don’s good humor seemed to return after the smack. He moved to the Third and recovered Abbie from his arms. “I’m still watching you, though. One wrong move, and the only thing you’ll be desiring is a quicker, easier death.”

The Third nodded. Again, not much of a talker. After a beat, he offered Don his hand to shake.

Don regarded it, then narrowed his eyes.

“When this is done, you and me are going to have a long, serious talk,” Don informed him. “When I’m through with you...we’ll see about a handshake then.”

“This one is for Hazel,” Lily said, moving to the Second with another chip in hand.

War. When he removed his helmet, he revealed a head of thick, golden hair and blue-green eyes. His nose was even more crooked than mine was—and almost as crooked as Lock’s.

The Second and Lock stared at each other for what felt like a small eternity.

“Do I need to say it?” Lock asked him, his brogue full of menace. “Or do ye already ken what happens to ye if I decide I don’t fancy this set-up anymore.”

The Second tilted his head to the side and raised his eyebrows.

Lock pulled back his lips and bared his teeth in return.

Whatever the exchange meant to the two of them, I didn’t quite understand. Lock had always been a war-like sort, and the Second was—well, war itself.

They faced off like that for long enough to make me feel damn uncomfortable, at any rate. It was like watching two tomcats in an alleyway, hissing at each other with their fur standing on end.

But when they reached a conclusion to their stand-off, they were apparently both happy with the results.

“All right, then.” Lock clapped the Second on the shoulder. “We’ll get along just fine. Pass him the bairn, Joanie. He’s worth our trust.”

“Um...right.” Joan looked at Lock like he was losing his mind—an assessment that she might’ve been right about, at that—but nonetheless carried little Hazel over to the Second and placed her in his arms. “Be good to her,” she warned him, “Or else whatever it was that you and Lock were just doing? When I snap, I’m going to go so ape-shit on you that you’ll look back on this moment and wish he’d just torn your throat out instead.”

The Second looked at Joan curiously, staring into her eyes as if he was trying to determine how serious of a threat she was.

It took a few seconds, but his face was a shade paler by the time he was done.

A rumble of acceptance passed through his throat—the first sound that any of the Riders had made since entering the room. He passed his chip to Hazel immediately after, then quickly handed her back to Joan with a look that struck me as equal parts reverence and fear.

His assessment wasn’t wrong. Whatever he thought Lock would do to him if he didn’t toe the line, evoking Joan’s wrath would bring him far, far worse.

Lily held up the final coin to the last remaining Rider.

Conquest.

The First.

As he reached up to remove his white helmet, for an exquisite moment I thought about standing up and giving him a hand with it—by taking a good, hard swing at him and knocking it right off his self-righteous head.

“Mal,” Ava whispered, meeting my eyes. She drew my gaze down to the blanket over her lap, which I currently had clenched viciously tight in my fist. “If you clench that blanket any harder, you’re going to rip it to shreds.”

“Yep,” I agreed. “But if I let go, I’ll have to rip *him* to shreds instead.”

The First let out a sharp huff of air through his nostrils, making a noise that was dangerously close to a laugh as he came forward. He had an aquiline nose, this one—straight as an arrow from the front, curved in profile. A Roman general nose. A Greek movie star nose.

On second thought, never mind knocking his helmet off.

Now that I'd heard him laugh, I had half a mind to use my fist to pound that nose of his into a bloody pulp.

"You're handsome," Ava said, looking up at the First with a weak, weary smile. "I don't know that it will make this any easier for us—but maybe Rosie will appreciate that someday."

She wasn't wrong—he was all right looking. His hair was a dark shade of brown. No bald spots. Nice enough. His irises were tawny and golden. Intelligent and warm. Hawk's eyes. His jawline was chiseled—the kind of jaw that could handle taking a punch.

Good—he'd need that.

"Ain't gonna be so handsome once I'm done rearranging his face," I growled as he reached down to take Rosa into his arms.

"Mal...stop it," Ava said with a sigh of annoyance. "All four of you men, for that matter—and you, Joan." Ava shot Joan a stern look. "You all need to simmer down—the sooner, the better. The Riders didn't ask for this any more than we did—and if my mother is right, these men are probably going to be your sons-in-law someday."

"That's exactly why I want to hit him," I informed her. "Don't need a son-in-law. Ain't got no use for one."

"Well, someday, Rosie might not give you a choice. Someday *far* in the future," Ava said pointedly as I crackled my knuckles, first one fist, then the other. "Until then, the Riders are only going to look out for these girls. They'll protect them. They'll watch over them. They'll keep them safe from harm. And given our collective luck with managing to stay out of danger..."

Evie let out a sharp, sudden laugh of pure nerves, then moved to cover her mouth with her hand. "Oh, God. I hadn't even thought about that yet. If this is the amount of trouble we've all gotten into without even meaning to—"

"Their fathers are all kings of Hell," Bea muttered, looking horrified. "Oh, fuck. They're *literal* hellions."

"Getting into trouble..." Joan winced with realization as she stared down at Hazel. "It's in their actual *blood*."

"They're going to need the Riders to look after them," Ava said with certainty. "They're our daughters—which means they're going to need all the help they can get."

I looked to the First again. He met my gaze, held it, then laid a hand on my shoulder.

It was a brave thing to do.

Especially since about half of me was still deciding whether or not I wanted to break his wrist.

“It’s an honor to protect this child,” he said. His voice was deep and rough, almost raspy from lack of use—but his tone sounded honest enough. Sounded like he meant it. “Do I have your permission to do so?”

I scoffed. “Well, not if yer gonna go talkin’ my ear off about it. I...I reckon...”

I looked down to Ava, who smiled gently and passed Rosie up to me.

I held our little girl in my arms, careful to keep her head up and cradle her neck just right. She was a precious little thing. So small. So new. Still all squinty and cherry-cheeked and...and—

Hell. She was perfect. She really was.

Must’ve gotten that from her mother.

She sure as shit hadn’t gotten it from me.

“All right,” I said to the First. “But what you said just now—I need you to mean that. I don’t want...” I shook my head. Words were failing me. It would’ve been so much easier if Ava had let me just keep making threats. “This here’s my daughter. My only daughter.” I grimaced, clenching my jaw as I swallowed back tears I didn’t have the wherewithal to deal with right now. “You take good care of her. Don’t fuck it up.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it.” The First took a breath, then shifted Rosie’s blanket back so he could lay it on her chest. “If I did, you wouldn’t have to kill me. I’d rather die. Letting her down would kill me first.”

“Well...” I watched the coin disappear beneath Rosie’s skin, then twisted my lips and nodded. “Yeah. All right. Good, then. Good.”

Carefully, I sat down on the edge of the bed next to Ava. I wanted her close right now—plus, I was pretty sure if I stayed standing, the wave of unfamiliar emotion that had just hit me would’ve knocked me off my feet anyway.

“Thank you, Mal,” Ava breathed as I passed Rosie back over to her. “I know that was hard for you.”

“It was hard for you too, darlin’.” I let out a huff of air as I glanced between the two of them. My daughter. My wife. Together—my entire

goddamn universe. “You just, ah...handled it a hell of a lot better than I did.”

“I did, yes.” A smile tugged at the corners of Ava’s mouth. “But that’s only because...” She furrowed her brow as a faint golden light illuminated her face from below. “Oh. Rosie...she’s...glowing?”

She was—and she wasn’t the only one.

I looked to Lily, and to Abbie, and to Hazel.

I looked to the First, the Second, the Third, and the Fourth.

All eight of them were shimmering with that same golden light. It was faint at first, but with every second that passed, it got stronger.

Lord Almighty.

So. The Big Guy had been watching all of this play out after all.

“That settles it, then,” Michael said in a hushed, holy tone. “The Almighty approves.”

“So he does.” Morgana sounded impressed—which was a little worrying. This had, after all, been entirely her idea. “Fancy that.”

“It’s...beautiful,” Ava whispered as she took in the glow radiating from beneath Rosie’s blanket.

“It’s all right,” I grunted back at her, already distracted by something far more compelling than the light.

The shine of the Almighty’s love and protection was pretty enough—but there was a greater beauty sitting right in front of me in that moment.

Two beauties, actually.

First, the red-faced baby girl who was quickly becoming one of the focal points of my world—and then, there was Ava. Still sweat-soaked, still exhausted from labor, still shaken by the events that had just unfolded before us here today—

And still the most gorgeous thing I’d ever laid eyes on.

Still mine. Always mine.

Forever mine.

FOUR YEARS LATER...

“**M**ore tea, Mrs. Haberdash?” With all the grace and decorum of a fine lady straight out of *Downton Abbey*, Lily lifted up her teapot and offered it to the Fourth—currently otherwise known as *Mrs. Haberdash, Duchess of Sillyville*.

Cordially, the Fourth bowed his head, careful not to topple over the massive purple sunhat that Lily had placed on top his green helmet, and held out his thimble-sized teacup for a refill. “Mmrmph.”

“Oh, how *lovely* the crumpets are this time of year!” Abbie declared in an affected accent that was either meant to be straight from Jolly Old England—or maybe the Deep South, circa 1961. “I do declare, Mrs. Crumblebottom, you simply *must* try one!”

Mrs. Crumblebottom—or, as we knew him, the Third—carefully plucked a crumpet from the tiered tower of pastries in the center of the table. He held it in front of the visor of his helmet with uncertainty, like he wasn’t sure whether he should actually try to eat it or not.

I could hardly blame him.

The last time the girls had made “crumpets” together, they’d used baking powder instead of flour. The sugar had been forgotten entirely.

Some gambles just weren't worth the risk.

"Mrs. Sprunket! I am *apawwed* with you!" Hazel scrambled to remove one of the oversized silk gloves she'd shoved her arms into for the occasion and giggled as she slapped the aforementioned *Mrs. Sprunket*—the Second—across his leather jacket with it. She leapt up dramatically, throwing the glove to the ground. "Pistols at dawn!"

"Hazel, come back! That's not how you play!" Lily called after her as Hazel raced off into the yard with the Second in hot pursuit.

"Do you want some tea, Mrs.—" Rosie scrunched her face up, blushing as she tried to remember the First's fake tea party name. "Um. Mrs..."

The First flipped up his visor. "Mrs. Sprinklepants," he supplied in a stage whisper.

"Oh. Right." Rosie laughed and gave him a shy smile, then clinked her teacup against his. "So? Do you?"

The First lowered his visor once more—careful not to disturb the lacy floral bonnet that Rose had fastened over top of it—then nodded.

"They're incredible," Evie said at my side. We were sitting on the front lawn outside of my cottage, drinking our iced tea while the girls and the Riders sipped on the imaginary stuff.

"They've got the Riders wrapped around their little fingers, don't they?" Bea blinked as she watched the little tea party scene continue to unfold. "This week, it's tea party. Last week, it was fashion show. What's next?"

"Oh, I hope it's fashion show again," Joan said with a laugh. "Nothing makes Lock feel better about this whole set-up than watching Hazel weasel the Second into a pair of my high heels."

"They're menaces." I closed my eyes as I joined Joan in her laughter. There was a warm breeze in the air, a bucket of sunshine shimmering down on us, and the four massive, leather-clad horsemen of the apocalypse were sitting just a few yards away, squeezed into tiny, child-sized chairs as they pretended to be fancy society ladies drinking fancy, society lady tea. "And I wouldn't have it any other way."

"Hey, darlin'. What'd I miss?" Mal came up behind me and kissed my cheek, then handed me a fresh glass of iced tea. He plopped down onto the grass next to my chair, sprawling out lazily like he didn't have a care in the world.

These days, I supposed he really didn't.

None of us did anymore.

“Did they get to the part where Mrs. Haberdash finds out Mrs. Crumbbottom is squandering the family fortune yet?” Luke asked, taking his place at Evie’s side. “Lily was telling me about it last night—she’s got it all planned out, you know. It’s actually quite compelling if everyone manages to stay on script.”

“It’s Mrs. Crumblebottom,” Evie corrected him. “And no—I think that doesn’t happen until all the crumpets are gone.” She glanced at me. “Did they remember to put sugar in them this time?”

“Oh, no. No, they most certainly didnae. Not a lick of sugar in a single one,” Lock said cheerfully. He nudged Joan’s shoulder. “Budge over so I can sit next to ye, lass—or better yet, sit on my lap instead.”

“Did you intentionally sabotage those crumpets, Lock?” Joan asked, rising.

Lock’s jaw dropped. As he sat down, he did his best to look innocent—an act that he clearly wasn’t cut out for. “Now, does that sound like somethin’ I would do?”

“It does, in fact,” Joan said, eyebrow arched.

Lock smiled broadly. “Ach, well...” His smile faded quickly as he took in the scene. “Where’s wee Hazel?”

“She decided she was done playing tea party and challenged the Second to a duel about a minute ago,” Joan said. “They’re over by the stables now.” She squinted and leaned forward as she sat on Lock’s lap. “I think Hazel’s just fake-stabbed him. He’s rolling on the grass and she’s kicking him while he’s down.”

“Mmph. Good girl. Good head on her shoulders.” Lock glanced back to Don, who was still making his way over with a tray of sandwiches for lunch—and a bucket of cold beers from the fridge besides. “You still plannin’ on buyin’ Hazel that knife for her birthday?”

“Depends,” Don said with a chuckle. “I still think she’d enjoy a fake one—but the more you push for a real one, the more I realize that encouraging her might not be the best idea.”

“Oh, who’s she gonna shank with it? The Second? Pff.” Lock waved the notion away. “He’s six-foot-seven and wrought from the blood of his enemies. If he cannae handle a few stab wounds...”

Lock’s voice trailed off as he watched my mother emerge from the house. Her hair was just as long and thick as it had been before her cancer

scare. Maybe it was just her youthful glow, but I could've sworn that with every year that passed, she only looked younger.

Which was kind of funny, because on the rare occasions that Leviathan dropped in from his travels to visit Rosie, he only seemed to look more wizened and aged.

Michael was at my mother's side. He looked like a changed man himself, with a small smile on his lips and a spring in his step. He'd been splitting his time between Heaven and Earth as of late. His opinions of immortal beings engaging in relationships with humans had done a complete one-eighty since he'd met Mom. The way he looked at her was actually...kind of sweet, coming from an angel who'd put us all through so much when we'd been on different sides.

In Michael's hands, he carried something draped with one of Mom's embroidered dishtowels as they approached.

"What's that?" I asked. Whatever it was, Michael held it like there was an object of great importance beneath that cloth shroud.

"Your mother and I have been...collaborating on something together, I suppose you could say." Michael passed the object to Mom and smiled at her as he uncovered it.

In her hands was a large round orb of milky glass—a crystal ball.

"We know you all have been worried about the girls' futures with the Riders," said Mom, waving us over. "So gather around. We want to show you that, without a doubt, the choice you all made for your daughters was the right one."

Mal helped me up from my chair and Joan hopped off of Lock's lap. Together, we all went to stand around Mom, Michael, and their little *collaboration*.

"You've figured out how to see the future?" I asked, impressed. "I didn't think that was even possible. You always used to say it was too uncertain to scry for with any clarity."

"Things have solidified more and more over the last several years," Mom admitted. "And with Michael's help building on the work that Belial and I started...yes. I think you'll all find that it's entirely possible now. Would you like to see what happens when the Four finally ride out across the Earth?"

I looked to my friends, who all seemed a little uncertain still. Uncertain—but definitely interested.

“Cannae hurt, can it?” Lock arched an eyebrow and loomed over the crystal ball. “If it sets my mind at ease—”

“And keeps you from stabbing anyone,” Joan added. “Then I think it’s a great idea.”

“Do we need to... hold hands or something?” Bea asked.

“Light a few candles and chant in Latin, maybe?” Evie laughed.

“Oh, no. It’s much easier than that,” said Mom. “All I have to do is wave my hand over the ball and...”

A torrent of silvery mist filled the ball beneath Mom’s palm. She moved her hand over the orb in a slow, circular motion and the mists faded to reveal an adult Lily riding on the back of the Fourth’s motorcycle across the desert. The Fourth wore his leather jacket, green helmet and jeans, same as always, but Lily was in a loose white dress. She tugged a veil from her hair and tossed it, along with a bouquet of flowers, into the dust behind them. She had an impressively large sniper rifle strapped across her back.

“Do you think they eloped?” Evie asked with a laugh of surprise. “Just like we did!”

“Maybe they did. It’s that gun she’s toting that worries me, though. That’s a shrine to Jesus Malverde—patron saint of Narcos,” Luke muttered, pointing out a tall pile of rocks with the image of a mustached man framed by desert roses along the side of the road. “Are they really going to...”

“Looks like,” Evie said with another laugh—this one a little more tense—as the Fourth steered his motorcycle down a path toward a large, foreboding-looking compound in the distance. “But...we always knew that the Fourth would bring death wherever he rode. It’s a good thing, isn’t it? He’s not targeting innocents—he’s going out to get the bad guys.”

“He’s lucky I trust him,” Luke said with a dark scowl. “I don’t like the idea of Lily going up against drug traffickers and murderers, but—”

His scowl softened into a look of tentative pride as Lily took the rifle from her back, bracing it against the Fourth’s shoulder as she took aim.

“The Fourth will keep her safe,” said Evie. “And I think future-Lily is going to be more than capable too.”

“Let’s see how Abbie is doing next.” Mom waved her hand over the crystal ball, and Lily’s scene vanished in a whirlpool of gray wisps.

The mists opened up to a view of Abbie in a wedding dress and veil. She stood before a massive, lavishly laden buffet table in a city that looked Italian—the country that Bea’s family was originally from. The Third was with her, wearing a tuxedo. They filled the plates for a long line of guests—some dressed in wedding attire, some dressed in dirty clothes that didn’t look well-suited for a wedding at all.

“I don’t recognize more than half these people,” Don said as he surveyed the scene. “If these are the Third’s guests...he certainly keeps interesting company.”

“I don’t think they’re wedding guests, Don,” said Bea. “I think...it looks like they’re feeding the poor right alongside everyone else they invited to celebrate.”

Don snorted. “Sweet of them. Expensive wedding, though.”

“I’m not so sure about that.” Bea pointed to the Third, who snapped his fingers over a few dishes that were running low. Immediately, they refilled at his command like magic. “Seems like the Third is taking care of the entire food budget.”

Don almost stopped glowering for a moment—at least, until Abbie threw her arms around the Third’s neck and gave him a passionate kiss for his efforts. He wound his arms around her, kissing her back just as hard.

“That weaselly bastard,” Don growled. “That’s it. I’m going to kill him.”

“It’s the future, honey. By the time all of this comes to pass, she won’t be a little girl anymore,” Bea reminded him. “None of them will be. And she looks happy, doesn’t she?”

“You’re right,” Don agreed begrudgingly with a sigh. “I suppose she does.”

It was true. Abbie’s smile lit up her whole face. It stayed that way as the scene shifted again and again. We saw Abbie and the Third in the back of supply trucks outside orphanages and women’s shelters all around the world. They served meals at food banks and passed out care kits to the homeless—always, without fail, side by side and looking at each other with eyes full of love.

The Third’s realm of power was desire—and along with Abbie, he was fulfilling it by helping feed the entire world.

“Now...for Hazel,” said Mom.

The mists of the crystal ball twisted and turned to the smoke of a war zone. Hazel stood in the midst of it wearing a white shirt, khakis and combat boots. She held a microphone in her hand. The Second stood watch with an assault rifle strapped across his back as Hazel spoke into the mic for a nervous-looking cameraman.

She looked like she was reporting live.

The Second removed his assault rifle as Hazel addressed the camera. Behind them, the bullets stopped flying. When the Second threw his gun to the ground, combatants emerged in a daze from both sides of the ruins in the background. They all looked ragged, but relieved. And most of all, they looked stunned.

“I’ll be damned,” Joan whispered, looking up to Lock. “They’re ending battles.”

“No, lass.” Lock nodded as the scene changed to one of Hazel addressing a chamber of men and women in suits. Flags of dozens of countries were hung behind her, along with the UN’s seal. From the sidelines, the Second looked on, helmetless and smiling at her as she spoke. “They’re ending wars.”

“And last, but far from least...” Mom waved her hand over the crystal ball again. “Our Rose.”

I peered into the mists inside the crystal as they began to swirl one last time. Mal’s arms around me tightened. He was as tense on the outside as I was within.

Lily and the Fourth would be taking down narcos on the back of a motorcycle in the future. Abbie and the Third looked well on their way to ending world hunger. Hazel and the Second had been in a war zone, bringing peace.

What kind of dangers would our daughter end up with when the First finally *claimed* her? What would her contribution to the world be?

Most importantly of all...would she be happy?

We’d bound her to whatever future was about to appear within Mom’s crystal ball. The other girls had looked ecstatic—but I knew it would break my heart if Rosie didn’t feel the same.

The mists inside the crystal pulled away to reveal a swish of white skirts and a pair of dainty bare feet. With every step they took across loamy black dirt, a kaleidoscope of flowers bloomed in their wake.

They were beautiful. *Magical*.

This was Rose's future: stirring flowers to life wherever she stepped.

The rest of the scene flooded in after. I recognized the location immediately: Rosie was moving toward the same stone altar where, so many years ago now, Mal and I had said our vows. Waiting for her there was my mother in a set of white robes. At her side was a man wearing a tuxedo and a white motorcycle helmet.

He pulled it off to reveal a handsome smile and bright, golden eyes as he offered Rose his hand.

The First.

In chairs all around the sacred clearing of the Seventh Daughters, I spotted all of us. Evie and Luke sat with Lily and the Fourth. They had a little girl with them that must have been Lily's daughter. Bea, Don, Abbie and the Third were wrangling three dark-haired little boys in tiny tuxedos of their own. The youngest of them was a giggling newborn clutching an Eglantine rose. Joan, Lock, Hazel and the Second all had impressive tans. Wherever they'd been ending wars at before they arrived must have had plenty of sunshine. Hazel's hands were folded over a growing belly—Joan and Lock would soon be grandparents, too.

The rest of the crowd of guests was filled with witches, angels, and demons.

"Looks like the gang's all here," Mal said at the sight of both black and white wings mingled together in the seats. He pointed at Belial and Leviathan, who sat next to Mom and Michael, surrounded by Seventh Daughters. Belial was glowing. Leviathan had his arms crossed over his chest in a petulant pout. He looked positively ancient—a grumpy old grandpa. "Heaven and Hell seem to have put aside their differences... and even Rosie's grandparents showed up. All of 'em."

"Aww." Mom smiled at Michael. "We're together in the future—and you're not even dead."

"It will take more than a woman to kill me, Morgana," he said fondly. "Even a witch of one like you."

"Or maybe the curse really is broken. Look at us." I pointed to where Mal and I sat in the front row. He had his arm around me. As Rose and the First joined hands, I even spotted a tear glimmering on Mal's cheek. Three teenage boys sat next to us. Unlike Rosie, they all had my unruly red hair. "We don't have any more daughters. Only sons."

“That explains why those flowers are blooming around Rose, then.” Mom arched an eyebrow. She looked impressed. “All of the family’s magic is in her.”

After Rosie and the First shared their kiss before the altar, the scene faded away. It was replaced my vignettes of Rose and the First in barren patches of land surrounded by rainforests and thick jungles, walking arm in arm. Wherever they moved, the first sprigs of new trees began to rise up from the dirt.

“And there’s how they’ll conquer the Earth,” Mal said, chuckling. “They’re bringing back everything that humans have destroyed.”

Everyone peeled away to start dinner once the visions from the future were finally done. Mom left her crystal ball resting on the grass near us as she and Michael went to join in on the tea party the girls were still throwing.

But Mal and I lingered. There would be time to help with dinner later.

For the moment, I just wanted a little while longer in his arms.

“It’s a good way for things to end up.” I stared up at Mal, searching those deep blue eyes of his. I wanted to smile—but I couldn’t be sure that it was finally safe to relax about this until *he* was sure. “Isn’t it?”

“It is,” Mal said. Slowly, his lips curled into a gentle grin. Mine shifted eagerly to match it. *Thank fuck.* “Hell of a lot better than the end of the world, any rate. And she looked...happy with him, didn’t she?”

“She did,” I confirmed. I’d been bracing for so many years now for some new trouble to arise. A new terror to come and plague us. A next chapter to open that somehow managed to find a way to be even worse than the last. But now that Mom had shown us our daughter’s future—now that Mal agreed that it was a good one—I finally felt like I could relax. “And so did you, for that matter.” I ran my fingertips across his cheek, then pinched it teasingly. “I think I might have even seen a single, manly tear rolling down your cheek.”

“Naw. That don’t sound like me,” Mal said with a chuckle. “Must’ve had somethin’ in my eye, is all.”

“Sure,” I agreed, sarcasm dancing in my voice. “Something in your eye.”

“Aw, c’mon, darlin’. A man’s allowed to shed *one* tear on the day his daughter gets hitched.” He glanced back at Mom’s crystal ball wistfully. “She looked beautiful, didn’t she?”

“Of course she did.” I raked my fingers through his hair, messing it up then pushing it back into place. “She’s got all your best features.”

“And most of yours, too.” Mal twirled one of my curls between his fingers. “Just seems like a shame she didn’t get yer hair.”

“Haven’t you got enough fiery redheads in your life?” I arched an eyebrow. “We only ever bring you trouble, you know.”

“Mm. True. But I like yer kinda trouble.” Mal moved his hand to my cheek and I leaned into the roughness of his touch. “Reckon I might be gettin’ into trouble with you for the rest of our lives.”

“Haven’t you had enough trouble for one lifetime, handsome?” I laughed as Mal lowered his lips to my neck. His stubble tickled as it scratched against my skin.

“Not by a long shot,” Mal purred into my ear. His hands moved to my waist, encircling it with a hungry intent. “We had some redheaded sons in that future yer Ma showed us. And there’s more than one way to make trouble together, after all...”

I closed my eyes and listened to my heartbeat. Even after all these years, that sound of promise in Mal’s voice still sent it straight to a gallop.

“The Riders are watchin’ the girls,” Mal reminded me. “And yer Ma. And a guardian angel, at that. Reckon that means you and I might be able to slip away... For some trouble.” I opened my eyes to find Mal winking at me. “If you were still interested in that kind of thing.”

I wound my arms around Mal’s neck and tugged his mouth down close to mine.

“I like your kind of trouble,” I whispered against his lips. “But...are you sure it’s all right if we sneak off for a bit?”

“’Course it is.” Mal stole a quick kiss then pulled back with a wolfish grin. “What’s the worst that can happen? Won’t be the end of the world.”

Mal drew back in to kiss me again—long and slow and hard this time.

He was right. When the apocalypse finally arrived, it wouldn’t reveal doom and destruction. Things would only get better.

The world was far from ending—and for our little family, a new era of had only just begun.



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